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## YEAR OF THE COMET

*A Complete Full-Length Novel*

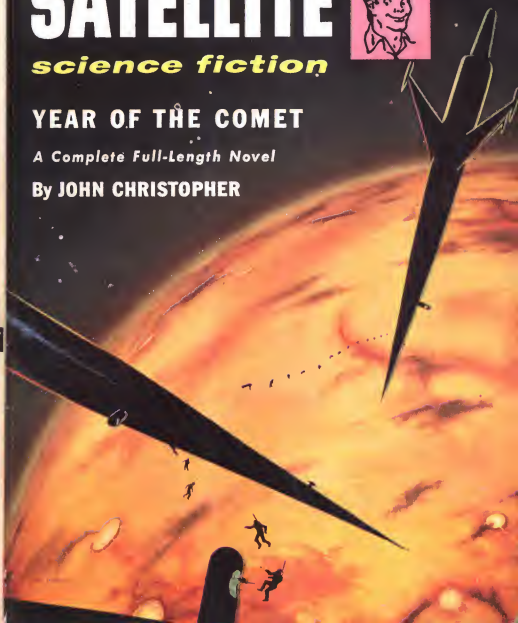
By JOHN CHRISTOPHER

SATELLITE SCIENCE FICTION

PDC



AUGUST 1957



# SATELLITE

## science fiction

AUGUST, 1957

Vol. 1, No. 6.

A COMPLETE NOVEL

### YEAR OF THE COMET

by JOHN CHRISTOPHER

*Like most men of the twenty-first century, Grayner did not start out as a rebel. He was loyal to the Managerial "Utopia" until events without parallel set off a world-shaking chain reaction.*

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SATELLITE SCIENCE FICTION, Vol. 1, No. 6. Published bi-monthly by Renown Publications, Inc., 501 Fifth Avenue, N. Y. 17. Subscriptions, 6 issues \$2.00; 12 issues \$4.00; single copies 35¢. Entered as second class matter at the post office, New York, N. Y. Additional entry at Concord, N. H. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. © 1957 by Renown Publications, Inc. All Rights reserved. AUG. 1957. Printed in U. S. A.

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A COMPLETE NOVEL OF THE FUTURE



# Year of the Comet

by

**JOHN CHRISTOPHER**

*The Managerials ruled the world with an iron hand. But iron rusts—and fingers that remain bent are likely to prove a handicap. If someone just had the courage—*



AFTER HE HAD put the remains of the meal down the chute and snapped the table back into the wall, Charles Grayner slumped automatically in his fireside chair and his eyes, as automatically, went to the flickering telescreen.

He knew his housekeeper's viewing habits by now. She alternated between three channels—*Red League*, *Honey*, and *Cosy Bright*. Grayner derived some

amusement from guessing which one had been left on, without turning the sound up and without looking at the controls. Tonight it was too easy. He recognized the singer: Loulou del Keith. She was a *Cosy Bright* exclusive.

He pressed the sound button on his chair arm, and both sight and sound went. After a moment they were replaced. The music now was Mozart, a string quartet

that he knew. And on the screen was an El Greco—"Cleansing of the Temple". Producer Hiram Dinkuhl had used that juxtaposition before—twice at least. Grayner felt a mild irritation. He had been one of those who had protested against this business of deliberately associating musical works and paintings.

The quartet ended on a flat note and Hiram Dinkuhl's face came through, characteristically smiling, half mocking, half enraged.

"This is Channel KF," Dinkuhl said. His voice was soft but flexible; it could resonate into anger. "I propose to save a lot of people a lot of money. I've hired a boy to go through my stenoflips for me. He has instructions to destroy any one that tells me I have to stop linking Mozart and El Greco—or Haydn and Rubens, Beethoven and Rembrandt. So save yourself a couple of quarters."

Dinkuhl smiled. "And this means you. It means that you are one of a mere two hundred malcontents, saboteurs—out of that great concourse of several thousand enthusiasts who hear and attend to Channel KF. So you don't deserve an explanation, but you're going to get one anyway.

"Had we the money we would hire for your delight musicians of unparalleled comeliness. And if we couldn't find them, we would hire a group of the lovelies

from *Red League* or *Superlux*, and patiently instruct them in the art of holding fiddles and a viola and a 'cello in just about the right operating positions. But we haven't the money, and so we give you paintings instead, and I pick them, that being the way things are."

Dinkuhl backed away from the camera, turned his back on it, and began searching around in one corner of the studio. The confusion appeared to get worse every day. There must at times be a clear-out but Grayner had never seen the place showing the effects of one. He was fairly sure that the mice, which the camera occasionally picked up rioting in the background, were a deliberate importation.

Dinkuhl came back to face the camera. "Now I remember," he said. "I fixed it all up before. Ladies and gentlemen, the KF newsreel!"

The music was a neat parody of the signature tune for the *Red League* newsreel, in a minor key, mocking. The screen showed the night sky, caught the Moon, and dissolved into a familiar moon-scape—the view from the Tycho Observatory.

"Here," said Dinkuhl, "on the frozen, challenging surface of the Moon, men serve their mistress, Science. Here, in the great observatory, the secrets of the universe are unriddled one by one.



Puny man reaches out into the vastness of intergalactic space, ever seeking, admitting no obstacle, no defeat. We're pretty good, aren't we? Inch by inch, light year by light year, the cosmos yields its mysteries like a woman—as someone with inspiration has possibly said already."

The scene shifted to the interior of the dome, and to the main room, housing the giant reflector. A figure stayed hunched over an eyepiece.

"And out there," Dinkuhl said, "along with mystery, there is beauty. Let us look, with these stalwart watchers of the skies, not at a new planet, but at—the *new comet*."

The screen was patterned with brilliant stars; the bright smudge of the comet was central, beneath Jupiter.

"There it is, below the giant Jupiter. More than two thousand years ago, as astronomers have calculated, this great comet last swept in its parabola round the sun. Think of it, my friends. More than two thousand years. While eighty generations of men have come and gone, while kingdoms have waxed and waned, while the human race has climbed so painfully to its present eminence, that majestic luminary, that celestial gas-bag, has been plodding around a course trillions of miles away in the outer dark."

Dinkuhl's voice became brisk. "And now for several months it will increase in brightness as it approaches the sun, swings round it, and prepares to leave us for another two millennia. During that time, the TV newsreels will keep you informed and chart the path of the comet among the twinkling stars. To you, in your fireside chair, the comet, from outer space. What an encounter!"

The camera came back to Dinkuhl's own face. He lowered his head so that light gleamed from the bald patch at the crown, and smiled up from under bushy eyebrows.

"You know what I suggest?" Dinkuhl asked. He leaned forward to the camera. "I suggest you get up out of that goddam chair, and go outside and have a look for yourself. You can find it with field glasses or, in the rare event of your possessing what used to be called normal vision, with the naked eye."

The screen went blank. Charles Grayner got up. He hesitated for a moment, and then went over to his sports locker. 'The field glasses were hanging on the inside of the door. He remembered, as he passed through the hall, to flip down the switch on the call amplifier. It was a long time since there had been a call while he was out in the garden or, for that matter, even while he was in the house and hence the action

was purely a routine one. The door slid to behind him and he was aware of the night air, damp and a little frosty.

He put on the small lights that edged the garden path, and quickly put them off again for even they took something from the night's royal darkness. Then he made his way down the path to the point, beyond the arbor, where his view of the night sky would be uninterrupted. Raising his glasses, Grayner found the comet—right under Jupiter. He looked at it until his arm began to ache and his hand shook the glasses.

It was nothing much—a smear of whiteness, with one of Jupiter's moons set in it like a pearl. Incredibly remote it seemed.

Grayner was preparing to go back to the house when he heard the loud ring of the call amplifier. Automatically he quickened his step. His eyes were sufficiently used to the starlight by now for him to see his way clearly. He pressed the door open, and cut the amplifier out. The din dropped to the usual persistent buzz.

In the lounge, he pressed the button for the information panel on the callscreen. The letters sprang into view at the left hand side, ran across, and jerked back again, in a never-ending series: GRAYNER FROM LEDBETTER—UC DIV HQ DETROIT—URGENT—UR-

GENT — PERSONAL — GRAYNER FROM LEDBETTER . . .

George Ledbetter! Charles wasted no time in putting the callscreen on reply circuit. While his Accept call was going out he pulled a chair over and sat down. He tried to be at ease, reminding himself that at thirty-eight he should be past the stage of becoming upset by unexpected calls from Headquarters.

It was not Ledbetter who took the call, but a young man, with a sleek look and the little ruby-lite badges on his lapels, spelling out United Chemicals, which in current fashion were replacing the old anodized aluminum UC signs.

"Grayner?" the young man said. "We haven't met, have we? I'm Official Paulton."

"Glad to know you," Charles said evenly.

"Manager Ledbetter wants to see you. He asked me to fix an appointment. Can you get up here in the morning?"

Grayner looked at him. Paulton made him nervous. There was not only the impression of a personality screen set up to dazzle, but also the feeling that if you stretched your neck a little in the right direction you could see right around it.

"It's rather short notice," he said slowly. "I like to be able to arrange things here at the labo-

ratory whenever I have to be away."

Paulton looked to one side, openly checking a dossier. "Let me see, your establishment is . . ."

Grayner cut in. "One junior assistant and two lab boys. All the same, I like to have things mapped out."

Paulton smiled. "It won't kill the economy—even if they loaf for a day. Can you make it by ten hundred?"

Grayner thought of saying that his gyro was out of action, but rejected the idea. Since they were apparently anxious to get him to Detroit they would certainly arrange for him to be picked up.

"All right," he said.

"Ten hundred. Look me up first. My room is F Seventy-three. You know your way around the place, I take it?"

"I've been there before."

"See you then." Paulton let his smile fade into a look of sober concentration, and then switched off.

Grayner's niche in the Saginaw laboratories of United Chemicals was a small but apparently secure one. At first he had resented the smallness but more recently he had felt himself valuing the security. There had been—since Ledbetter had taken over the year before—a shaking up that had brought down quite a few in the Saginaw hierarchy. He had congratulated himself on being too

unimportant—in what was clearly enough a blind alley—to be counted worth the shotgun. Now he was forced to wonder about that. And he became seriously worried.

But if this *were* a demotion—a removal back, perhaps, to the general laboratory—it was difficult to see why he should be called urgently to Detroit to be informed of it. A demotion was a routine matter to be dealt with through routine channels. There would be no need for an interview with Ledbetter to confirm it.

Unfortunately the same argument applied to another possibility—that there might, after all this time, be a promotion in it for him. Promotion procedures followed iron-clad rules. Protocol had it that everything went through the local Manager, and there was no reason why there should be any urgency.

For that matter, he had to admit to himself that there could be no justification for a promotion, anyway. Sixteen years research in the radioactive properties of diamonds scarcely fitted him for the control of any larger project.

The double problem left him up in the air. No demotion, no promotion—why then the call to Detroit? Grayner grinned to himself. Could one of his reports have given someone the idea that he was on to a synthesis? But

that conjecture didn't fit either. Recent reports had covered no new ground, and Ledbetter was anything but the kind of fool to read fantasies into them.

*To hell with it*, he thought, but knew it would not be dismissed so easily.

## II

FOR A MOMENT Harry Paulton looked puzzled when he saw Grayner's face. Charles was standing in the corridor outside room 73 on F floor, and the small inset callscreen transmitted his features to the panel on the wall facing Paulton's desk. Then Paulton's face cleared.

"Charles Grayner, of course!" he said. "Come on it."

The door beside Grayner slid open, and closed after him as he went through. Paulton had genuine interest and recollection on his face when they met in the flesh. His control, Charles reflected, was admirable; many would have overdone the forgetfulness. He shook hands with a warm grip.

"I'd like to plead pressure of work," Paulton said, "but . . ." He smiled and a gesture took in the bare desk and the telescreen alive on the wall—he had ostentatiously knocked the sound off while Charles was entering. "I guess I don't improve with idleness."

Grayner smiled and said nothing. If Paulton wanted, for some obscure reason of his own, to put over the popular impression that Administration life was the true one, he saw no reason why he should rise to the bait.

Paulton was watching him astutely enough behind his self-deprecating smile. "Anyway," he said, "that's no good reason for wasting your time as well. I told Ledbetter ten fifteen—to allow for your not being quite on time. But now we'll breeze right in."

George Ledbetter's rooms were on B. Paulton led Grayner through to the room marked *Manager G. D. Ledbetter*, and whistled at the door. It opened, and they went in. Ledbetter was talking into a dictaphone. He looked up pleasantly as they entered, but went on to finish the stenoflip in which he was engaged. Paulton waved Grayner to a seat, turned and left the room.

Charles had seen George Ledbetter on newsreels and in the UC telezine, and had thought of him as a little on the stern side. But now he appeared to be entirely friendly and relaxed. He slid a cigarette box over, and Grayner took one. Ledbetter took one himself. The small flame jet rose from the desk-lighter and they both bent forward to light up. Ledbetter settled back again in his desk, his cigarette between his fingers and his other hand

pulling at his long chin in a reflective manner.

He said to Charles, "You'll be wondering why I sent for you."

Grayner was determined to preserve his wariness, but he could not help responding to some extent to the intimate friendliness of Ledbetter's approach. He could see now why he had come up so fast; could understand why some of his recent seniors must still be rubbing their eyes.

"Well, naturally," Charles said. "And the notice was rather short."

Ledbetter nodded. "We'll blame Paulton for that. The reason I wanted to see you is that I am in the middle of the usual thing that new Area Managers go in for. I'm having a re-organization. It's expected of me, unfortunately. Once it's over, I can settle down and let things run themselves until my translation elsewhere—or my decease."

He smiled and looked directly at Grayner. "You will have noticed some of the earlier changes in your own plant?"

Charles nodded. "I'd hoped maybe I was in too small a niche to be noticed."

Ledbetter examined him again—searchingly this time. "You've been in that niche too long," he said.

From one of the drawers in his desk he produced a microfilm capsule, and clipped it into

the projector. The telescreen on the wall lit up and displayed what was immediately recognizable as one of Charles' own recent reports. *The effect of zeta irradiation on the photoelectric properties of a type II diamond* (Cape white).

"You write a very fair report," Ledbetter said. "But you're not ambitious?"

"You have my psychoplan," was Charles' smiling reply.

"That, too," Ledbetter acknowledged. "But there has been some recent revision of the methods of evaluation. In fact, you might say that the only thing Psycho and Medicine don't revise is their charming air of infallibility. Frankly, an error was made in your case. You aren't really the dead-end type at all."

"I always suspected it," said Grayner. "But it's a little late to do anything about it now, I imagine."

"Ye-es. In any major respect, anyway. I could let you have official condolences."

"Thanks, I'll take them as read. You didn't call me in simply to offer the condolences—official or otherwise?"

Ledbetter's hand reached out towards the controls of his aromofact. "Any objections to a whiff of the bounding wave?" he asked.

Charles shook his head and watched him finger one of the buttons. Almost immediately the

tang of seaweed and salt water was in the air. His report faded off the telescreen and was replaced by a rocky seascape. He had the impression that Ledbetter was showing off, but he did not resent it.

"This is one of the few gadgets they've given me that I'm genuinely attached to," Ledbetter said. "I get away to yachting whenever I can. No, of course I didn't bring you up here simply to tell you P and M snafued your psychoplan sixteen years ago. If there had been nothing that could be done about it, I should have seen to it that you weren't informed at all. You can weave a damn sight more tangled a web undecieving people than the other way around.

"Now, let's get it straight and lay it on the table. Alpha—I'm in a mood for change. Beta—you should never have been tossed into that lab in the first place. Gamma's the rub. Gamma! You've spent sixteen years messing around with radioactive diamonds. That restricts the possibilities of what we can do with you to a somewhat startling extent."

"Very interesting," Charles said. "How about Delta?"

"Coincidence," said Ledbetter, "rears its ungainly but attractive head. There's a little place going at a spot called San Miguel—south of San Diego. Wonderful

climate and the wide Pacific. I wish I was there myself. Area HQ is at Los Angeles—a chap called Mettrill. You'll like him."

Charles said, "Establishment?"

Ledbetter leaned back. "I thought you would ask that. 'L' category." He kept his eyes fixed on Grayner's face. Charles felt himself flushing slightly.

"It's a wonderful opportunity," Grayner said at last. "From one assistant and two lab-boys to one assistant and two lab-boys. What do I do for the next sixteen years—electrify diamonds instead of irradiating them?"

Ledbetter grinned. "Think of the climate! It's not quite so bad as it looks. Still diamonds, naturally. What else could we give you? But you will be picking up some interesting threads. This for instance."

He removed the microfilm of Charles' report and replaced it with another. The monotonously rolling sea was replaced by neat lines of text and a number of equations. Charles let his eyes skim across them. He glanced at Ledbetter, and the Manager set the film in slow rolling motion up the screen. The report unfolded itself before them. In the list of references at the end there were half a dozen papers of his own. He looked at Ledbetter.

"Where was this published?"

Ledbetter let the seascape

come back before he answered. "It hasn't been published."

"Why not?"

"Because that is one of the advantages of your new post. Don't publish if you don't want to. Don't do a damn thing if you don't feel like it. Sit and wriggle your toes in the ocean all day if you have a mind. The lab's on its own—on the edge of an orange grove I understand. You might call yourself a scientific hobo, with endowment."

Charles' mind had been engaged with the paper that had just been projected for him. Things began to click into place. "Do I come under Contact Section?" he asked.

Ledbetter smiled and turned the sea scents higher. "No, of course not. You've been cleared for security by them long ago."

"You're certain of that?"

"People," Ledbetter said, "have some odd ideas about Contact Section. I can't vouch for the other managerials, but in UC their budget doesn't run to special laboratories. And what would Contact Section do with non-insulating diamonds? Non-insulating callscreens are about their line of country."

Charles said patiently, "Then it will be all right for me to publish whatever I want?"

"I didn't say that. All right—I'll abandon the smokescreen. You weren't supposed to have

asked so many awkward questions at this early stage, but yes, you're guessing in the right direction. The new job is restricted. You are under San Diego for Admin but any reports you make go direct to Nikko-Tsi at our headquarters at Graz."

"And what do they want me to turn out?" Grayner asked.

"I'm not in the secret. This report of Hans Isaacssohn's you've just seen doesn't mean anything to me because it's not my line. But I suspect that there isn't anything vital in it anyway, or I wouldn't have been given it to show you."

"It's fairly routine stuff, as a matter of fact," Charles said. "Bombardment conductivity. We've done a certain amount of that at Saginaw." Ledbetter nodded his appreciation. Charles continued, "There are one or two points in it, though . . ."

"Those points, I take it, were meant to whet your appetite. Do they?"

"Yes." Charles hesitated before he shot the next question at the Manager. "What became of my predecessor? Radiation poisoning or the managerial variety?"

"A good question. Isaacssohn, I understand, was by way of being an amateur sailor like myself—plenty of scope for seafaring in a place like that, as I've indicated. I don't know the details—except that his boat came

back, keel upwards, and he didn't. It's a tricky coast, I understand."

Grayner thought for a moment that Ledbetter looked at him oddly, but there wasn't enough in it to get hold of a meaning.

"A very tricky coast," said Ledbetter. "I should stay away from it when the flow tide's getting near the turn."

"I doubt if I shall do any sailing at all," said Charles.

Ledbetter shook his head. "What a waste! I take it you are accepting, then?"

"Do I have any choice?"

"On a job like this you have the full rights in practice that you normally have in theory. Look at it from their point of view."

Charles nodded. "When do you want me to start?"

Ledbetter glanced at the notepad inset on the desk under his right hand. "You will be turning your gyro in at Saginaw. We'll pick you up with your things in the morning and you'll join the ten hundred stratoliner here. In your new position you are up five hundred a month. You qualify for a Cat C gyro *and* limousine, too."

"Wonderful."

Ledbetter looked at him keenly. "Had you come as far up from the bottom as I have you would think so. One other triviality—you'll be working with an ex-Israeli."

"Yes? A man or a woman?"

"A young woman. Isaacssohn was from Israel, you know, and he picked a countryman for his assistant. It was natural enough. You will need her. I have the impression that a lot of the valuable side of Isaacssohn's work may only be traceable through her."

"She should prove helpful then," said Grayner.

Ledbetter glanced at the chronometer on the wall. "You'll have some packing to do, so I won't keep you any longer."

Charles stood up, said, "And what happens to my own lab? I won't even have time to tidy things up."

"I did want to consult you about that, of course. It very nearly slipped my mind. We propose letting Raoul Casey take over. He's been with you for five years and though he's young we believe he's all right? What are your views?"

"Yes, he'll do. What do P and M think? Does Casey fit the niche satisfactorily, by present reckoning?"

Ledbetter grinned. "By present reckoning. Good luck and I know you'll like your new post."

GRAYNER left the UC HQ building immediately because he wanted to drop in, for the last time, on Stone's, the little gramophone record exchange at the cor-



ner of 27th and Main. He had very little packing to do—and he had decided against going back to the laboratory.

There was only old Micah Stone himself in the shop when he reached it, and he was rummaging among his untidy papers in the battered walnut desk at the end of the shop.

Charles nodded to him and started browsing through the shelves of assorted records near the door. He found a set of "Munich John Passion", and was studying it for imperfections when another customer came into the shop.

He recognized Hiram Dinkuhl instantly. The odd thing was that Dinkuhl recognized him, for they had met only once some years before, in circumstances that were now vague.

The proprietor of Channel KF said, "Charlie Grayner! Well I'll be damned! I see you're having a last look round before you light out for the land of sunshine?"

They shook hands.

"You astonish me," Charles said.

Dinkuhl grinned. "You don't show it."

"You do, though. I suppose it would be rude to ask you precisely where you got your information?"

"It must be six or seven years since I saw you." Dinkuhl shook his head, clearly delighted with

his own powers of recollection. "At the Sullivan place, before they got a transfer to Melbourne. I thought you might be the one who was going to California. As for my source of information—that, Charlie, is one thing you must never ask a TV man."

"You make it sound important," Charles said.

"Everything," Dinkuhl said expansively, "is important. Similarly everything is trivial. But if I were in your shoes I should regard getting away from this putrid section of the stinking cheese to one slightly less high as very important indeed. I'll never forgive Gillray of Telecom for refusing to let us transfer to Frisco."

Dinkuhl put his hand on Charles' arm. "You've got time enough. Come back with me and have a glass of something."

Dinkuhl's cordiality was flattering, and it was true that he had time to spare. Grayner nodded. "Thanks," he said.

Dinkuhl had an old runabout automobile into which he had contrived to fit a gasoline engine he had rescued from somewhere. He did not drive to the studio but to his semi-suburban home about a mile away overlooking Lake Erie.

He led Charles upstairs to a large room on the first floor, with a view on the lake. The place was untidy and had not been dusted for some time. There was

something definitely unusual about the room, too, and it took Charles only a few minutes to find out what it was. The wall lacked a telescreen.

Dinkuhl brought Charles a drink in a very fine looking, wide-bowled glass. Both bowl and stem were delicately engraved—diamond engraving, Charles reflected with professional interest—and the liquor itself was a pale amber color.

Dinkuhl held his own glass up. "To a change of scenery!" he said.

They drank. The wine had an odd, tangy taste. Charles held the glass up in inquiry. "What is it, Manager?"

"Call me Hiram," Dinkuhl said. "You like that wine? It's a little something I knocked up myself. Turnip-and-tomato wine. Not bad, eh? Not bad at all."

Answering his own question, he simultaneously refilled both their glasses. He fished out of one pocket the horn-rimmed spectacles he sometimes wore in the studio and put them on to study Grayner more closely.

"Well, then," he said. "What are you going to do for cultures in the Far West? You're one of the customers. You wrote me a letter about a month ago. Remember?"

"I can give up TV," Charles said. He smiled. "Even KF. I might even take up reading."

"It is an unhappy fact," Dinkuhl said, "that the only people who can give up TV are precisely those who commonly patronize KF. Well, I guess it may last out my time."

"I never did understand why Telecom let you keep running."

"For only one reason, but a good one. Our charter got incorporated, in some strange way, in their constitution. I give the credit to my predecessor, a guy called Bert White. The proprietorship of KF is a self-perpetuating office for which the chief qualification is low cunning, but White was exceptional. Short of rewriting their own constitution, a desperate step that might stir up a regular horde of hibernating skeletons, they've got to go on giving us rights of telecasting. They just have to get what satisfaction they can from watching us slowly fade away; but it is slow."

Charles said, "I never knew your charter was pre-managerial."

Dinkuhl stared at him. "You could not seriously have thought that Telecom spawned us of their own free will? I was under the impression our pedigree was better known. We represent one of the few remaining strands of capitalism in the modern world."

"But if Telecom can't touch you?"

"There's something else that can. Money. Comes the Roman Empire, feudalism, capitalism,

managerialism. But one little problem remains constant: how to balance a budget. It will not have escaped your notice that we have had inflation with us for the last couple of hundred years? We're the fixed income boys.

"We've retrenched and cut down and done everything except live on immoral earnings. And the result? With one station beaming a small circle round this environ of Hades, the end is almost in sight. And Gillray, and all the rest of Telecom, will laugh their silly heads off when it comes.

"Why should people contribute to TV? It's a free service, isn't it? I know one thing: KF can't run another twenty years under managerialism."

"And they won't let you move west for the passing," Grayner said.

"That is what really irked me," Dinkuhl said. "They have control over extensions in areas under their jurisdiction. We had a station in Frisco once, but they choose to regard re-opening it as an extension and turned thumbs down. If they had let me have that, I'd have taken it. I was even looking forward to the closing ceremony. But in Detroit . . . not if I can prevent it."

"Can you?" Charles asked with interest.

"Have some more wine." Charles watched Dinkuhl refill

his glass without demur. The taste remained strange but the residual warm glow was very pleasant. "Had I the talent for politics, for downright chicanery, of my illustrious predecessors, I would be fairly confident. As it is, I seriously doubt it."

"The methods you're going to adopt are secret, I suppose?" Charles inquired tentatively.

Dinkuhl smiled sourly. "As secret as your transfer to San Miguel. There's only one line I can try. Under managerialism, we're sunk. So I shall try switching us to the one tiny oasis where managerialism doesn't send its camels—to Israel."

"Well, good luck." Charles thought about it for a moment. "Not very hopeful, is it?"

"I like you, Charlie," Dinkuhl said. "You put things well. I can always join *Red League* again. I guess you know I started with that outfit?"

"No. I didn't know."

"The day I tossed my Telecom membership card in the lake was the happiest day of my life. I'm not even sure which lake it was now. I suppose they would make me out a new one."

Dinkuhl glanced at his watch. It was extraordinarily big and he wore it on his wrist instead of on his watch-finger.

"But pending Israel or *Red League*, the show must go on. I must get back to rehearsal.

Come with me—I'll drop you by the UC building."

After the wine, the smell of gasoline was a little sickly. Charles was glad when Dinkuhl kicked the door open to let him out.

"On your way," Dinkuhl said. "Wait . . . one more thing." Charles looked at him. "I hear the boating's tricky on that coast."

"I've already been told that," Grayner said.

"This is official. The voice of the KF News Reel." Dinkuhl grinned, pulled the car door to, and drove off in a cloud of dust.

### III

CHARLES GRAYNER still had the habit, on first acquaintance, of appraising young women for romantic possibilities, although for some years it had been a relatively academic one. Sarah Cohn did not make a good initial impression, even academically. She was attractive enough—dark and rather square-faced and giving an impression of neatness and grace in small things—but her personality was unattractive.

She was nervous, and the nervousness made her appear brusque, so that she quickly succeeded in communicating her lack of ease to Charles. It was not a good start to a working association that would necessarily have to be close.

The laboratory was on high ground, facing the sea and perhaps a hundred yards from it. There was a good view of San Miguel, which was about a mile away, and the rear entrance looked into an orange grove which appeared to stretch indefinitely away into hazy blue distances. At intervals during the day one of the giant robot tree-tenders would rumble down the aisles separating the rows of trees, spraying some aerosol that effectively blanketed the tender smell of the ripening oranges.

In among the trees the radiant heaters squatted on their long poles, waiting for the nightfall which would activate them. You had to hand it to Agriculture, Grayner felt, for efficiency, but it was a pity that it had to include de-scenting an orange grove.

The equipment in the laboratory was very good. Money had been spent here, and he felt he knew UC policy well enough to be sure that that meant they had expected to get something out of it. The difficulty was finding precisely what.

Hans Isaacssohn's notes were scrappy. Grayner spent the first couple of days almost exclusively in familiarizing himself with them. The trouble was that the reports, on the face of it, did not add up to a picture that jelled.

The work that had been done had covered a number of differ-

ent subjects, though experiments on diamond, selenium and germanium predominated, but even for the latter three it was difficult to determine any consistency of approach. It was the kind of work, clearly enough, which would gain considerably in meaning with the application of the key—the key being the trifling matter of what Isaacssohn had been driving at.

Grayner's lack of any positive information in that respect obliged him to fall back on Sarah. He found her in the north room, engaged in the graphitization of a specimen of carbon. Grayner stood behind her without saying anything for a couple of minutes. She might have been so absorbed in her work as to be unaware of him, but he knew she was not.

He said at last, "And the next step?"

Sarah Cohn turned round slowly, holding a pair of asbestos tongs. She looked at him steadily, and behind the steadiness the young woman was obviously jumpy and hostile. "Slow bombardment, drying out for twenty-four hours, and checking lattice changes by positron diffraction."

"To establish?"

She hesitated. She continued to look at him but her gaze was edgy. "It's a continuation of a series of experiments Dr. Isaacssohn put in hand."

It was a warm day outside and

the distant rumble of the tree-tender had a somnolent note.

Charles said impulsively, "I'd like to have a talk with you, Sarah. You can spare half an hour?"

She nodded her head towards her workbench. "And leave it?"

"Luke can look after this stage of it, can't he? Since it's so fine, I thought we might walk out towards the shore. The sea's not all that familiar a thing to me; I come from lake country."

To whatever suspicion and distrust already existed was now added, he realized, the routine suspicion that a pass might be about to be made. It was flattering that he could still be taken for a wolf.

She said distantly, "If you'd prefer that."

They walked down to the shore in silence. There was a path down the slope that drifted into the beach at a spot where half a dozen flat-topped rocks huddled together with an air of imitating a cromlech. To the south there was something of an anchorage—a rough breakwater with a couple of concrete posts built on. They had provided the tie-up, Charles assumed, for his predecessor's boat.

He nodded towards them. "What became of the boat?"

Sarah was still standing, as though awaiting orders. He said, "We might as well sit down, I

guess." And she sat on a stone a few feet from the one he took.

She smoothed her skirt down and looked not at him but away out to sea. "The boat? They took it away."

"They?"

"Your friends," Sarah said, as she glanced at him. "Contact Section."

Grayner had begun to be angry before he realized it; he repressed the feeling decisively. It had been a shock to her; probably she had got on well with Hans Isaacssohn—there might even have been something more in it than that. And Contact Section . . . the C.S. members he had encountered had not impressed him by their qualities of tact and the handling of difficult situations. All the same, it was essential that she should not settle into an attitude of surliness towards him.

"We might as well get some things clear at the start," he said slowly. "I'm not Contact Section, and I haven't been briefed by Contact Section. I was under the impression that it was Isaacssohn who had dealings with them. I've been doing a very ordinary job in diamond research under Detroit Sector, and I've been pulled in here apparently because they wanted someone in a hurry. I'd hoped you might be able to help me."

Her eyes had swung to him

while he talked. "Hans had nothing to do with Contact Section. I know that."

Charles said, trying to make it delicate, "It's just those things you know that I'm interested in. Try to see it from my point of view. I'm suddenly pitched into a job like this. Usually one has the other man's programme to follow, but Hans Isaacssohn didn't have time to leave an outline, and as far as I can see UC never did know exactly what he was doing. If they did, I can't see why I should have been tossed into it blindfold."

Her eyes were on the sea again, and there was anger in her voice when she said, "It was most inconsiderate of Hans to get drowned without first leaving you detailed instructions."

"I'm sorry." He looked at her averted face, trying to gauge the kind of emotion responsible for the bitterness of her mood. "I'm probably not putting things very well," he said. "You see, I didn't know Dr. Isaacssohn. One can't—"

Grayner thought for a moment she might be going to smile. She said, more gently than she had spoken so far, "You still aren't putting them very well, are you? You're right that you can't be expected to feel very sorry for someone you never knew. But at least when you are talking about

him you can give him his title—as you finally did.”

He looked at her in astonishment; then he understood. “How long have you been over?” he asked. “If that isn’t another rude question.”

She caught the point. “Three years.”

“You took your degree in Israel?”

She nodded. “In Jerusalem.”

“And I suppose you have been with—with Dr. Isaacssohn all the time? It’s a matter of usage. There’s no disrespect in not giving a man his title here. Scientific titles are very rarely used anyway. With Managers and Directors it’s a different thing, of course.”

“I’m sorry,” Sarah said. She studied his face. She had a direct and honest look and for the moment her nervousness had gone. “I’ve been rather a fool about that, I suppose.”

“Perhaps we can get off on the right foot now,” he said, “both of us.”

She did smile then, but her eyes were still wary. “What is it you want to know?” she asked.

Grayner looked at her helplessly. “Primarily, what I am supposed to do. You seem to have a line to follow. It’s somewhat disturbing that I haven’t.”

The mistrust was suddenly back in her voice again. “It’s hard

to believe—that they would appoint you in Hans’ place and not tell you exactly what you were expected to do.”

“All the same,” Charles said, “I’d like you to make the effort.” He paused. “It may make a difference that I’ve been rushed straight here from Detroit. I gather you are implying that Graz knows all the answers, but that doesn’t mean Detroit does. I’ve learned from experience it’s always better to get along on your own—if you can. Pestering Graz HQ can have unfortunate results.”

She wrinkled her brow. “Am I being dumb again? Is such carelessness common in a managerial?”

“Not unusual. Why do you think all the original work is now being done in Haifa and Jerusalem?”

Sarah was pleased, and surprised. “You see that, too,” she said. “Hans was after a new power source, on a photoelectric basis. I don’t know that I can be terribly useful to you. He had reached the stage where he could see things a lot more clearly, but there was still a good deal of work to be done.”

“Power,” Charles mused. “Photoelectric? For the first time I believe I have an inkling. Selenium obviously—germanium and diamond.”

"Long-term irradiation of Type Three diamonds induces a fundamental structural change—the refractive index."

"I saw that report. I thought it was a blind for something else. Type Three diamond—that's new to me. And I find it hard to take that refractive index change. It's a startling figure he gives."

"Type Three signifies those stones which *do* respond in precisely that way to prolonged irradiation. There aren't many, but they seem to come indiscriminately from Type One and Type Two groups. The germanium, incidentally, is in because of the structural similarity to diamond. As far as I know it never gave anything. But Hans didn't find it easy to explain the lines he was following. He was still working on germanium."

"And titania?" asked Grayner.

"We tried a few things with titania. But nothing came of it. The greater refractive index in the raw state doesn't help at all. It's a structural matter."

"Well," Charles said thoughtfully. He felt in his pocket. "Cigarette?"

Sarah shook her head. He took one and lit it himself. A breeze was freshening from the ocean. It blew the flame away from his cigarette and pulled a lock of Sarah's hair round her cheek.

"So it's a power source," Grayner said. "That explains a few

things at least. It explains why it was such a rush job getting me down here and also—" He looked at Sarah with attention. "Did you know the information had got out—outside UC, I mean?"

She said bitterly, "Does it explain an overturned boat drifting back to shore?"

Gloomily Charles surveyed his cigarette. "Whatever it is, I'm in it, up to the neck." The impact of her last words came promptly home to him. "Look, are you suggesting Hans Isaacssohn was murdered?"

Sarah was silent for a moment. "I talk too much," she said at last. "I suppose it doesn't matter now. If you are Contact Section I've told you enough as it is. And if you aren't you might as well know what I think. Hans learnt his sailing in the Mediterranean. It's not as placid a sea as you people over here are inclined to imagine. The day he was drowned there was a fair swell but nothing that would be likely to worry him unduly."

"I don't know a thing about sailing or the sea. But accidents do happen. And George Ledbetter told me it was a tricky coast."

She said, "Ledbetter," as though repeating the name was enough. She added, "Hans never thought it particularly tricky. He had been sailing it for some years."



It would be difficult to imagine a seascape more peaceful than the Pacific presented just now. But Grayner was not convinced of anything except that his new assistant had been dangerously unsettled by the recent events. He tried to unravel the ugly possibilities.

"If you think that—why the objection to Contact Section? Surely you're not implying they had anything to do with it? UC would hardly be likely to kill a goose just when it's getting broody. Why didn't you tell them what you thought about Isaacssohn's death?"

"I did."

He was surprised. "And?"

"They would not take it seriously." Her brows tightened, remembering. "They reported accidental death."

The phantasmagoric mists were clearing, leaving behind a familiar and recognizable world framing an ordinary hysterical girl, instead of a nightmare situation pivoting on murder. It might be unpleasant if she persisted in this point of view. He would not like to have to call in Psycho and Medicine, especially since he had no great faith in their techniques. But at least he could see his way to handling things.

"And gotten out—where?" Sarah asked.

"Gotten out?" Grayner repeated.

Her voice was impatient. "You said that the information had gotten out. I suppose, about our work here?"

"Oh! Yes, it seems to be known to some extent. At least, I had the impression that something was known. I don't know how much."

"Inside UC—or another managerial?"

"Strictly speaking, another managerial. To a friend on Telecom."

"And this was in Detroit. Didn't it seem odd to you that Ledbetter should be in the dark, and not your Telecom friend?"

"Not really. I didn't mean to imply that he necessarily knew anything more than Ledbetter did. And Ledbetter wasn't entirely in the dark. He knew that it was restricted work and had one of Isaacssohn's reports on his desk—not that it conveyed anything to him."

The interview, Grayner realized, had changed its course. Sarah was questioning him. The problem was to ease her off the subject without upsetting her further. He would like to keep her well disposed towards him if it were possible.

He said, "Why do people—you, for instance, and Isaacssohn—come over from Israel in the first place? Faith in the managerial ideal? Or what? Not just for the fleshpots, I take it?"

"People come over for both those reasons," she said. "There are always some students who find the system in operation across the border more attractive than that at home. And the standard of personal comfort is less high in Israel. There's a third reason as well, though. My father came over as a political refugee, and I came with him."

*Political refugee*—it was hard to get hold of a term that had ceased to be valid, in the major world, a century before. He saw Sarah smile, understanding his bewilderment.

"In what way?" he asked.

"It would be difficult to explain. Men conspire as much in Israel as they do here. But they conspire in different ways. Daddy was in some plot to overthrow the government, and the plot was discovered. He would have been imprisoned if he had stayed."

Charles said apologetically, "I'm afraid I don't even know what kind of government you have in Israel. It's not a monarchy, is it?"

"In the true sense of the word, yes. A one-man rule. The President has the advice of the Sanhedrim, but he doesn't need to take the advice."

Grayner was about to ask what the Sanhedrim might be, and then thought better of it. Something else struck him.

"Your father was mixed up in

a plot against the President? And what about Isaacsohn?"

"Hans was in it, too."

"Then, if there was something suspicious about his death, might it not be that—?"

Sarah interrupted decisively. "No. It would only have been imprisonment if they had stayed. We are not a primitive people. And anyway it was Daddy who was one of the leaders of the plot. Hans played only a very minor part." Her eyes were on a hydroplane, skimming across the ocean's middle distance. "It's only here that the innocent are killed, simply because they get in somebody's way."

"Your father?" he asked. "Does he like it over here?"

She shrugged. "It's better than being in prison. He teaches History at Berkeley."

"History?"

"Yes." Sarah smiled. She had been perceptibly thawing. "There still are some who take it. He has a few students at present. He gets paid a little less than"—she gestured towards the laboratory—"than Luke does. But he has modest needs."

Grayner got up. "We should be getting back. He helped Sarah, in turn, to her feet. "You can't be expected to be greatly impressed by a lot of the things over here, or by the people," he said. "I'm not myself. But it would be a help if you could regard me as a

—well, as a neutral anyway. I shall be depending on your help.”

He thought of saying more, but decided not to. They walked back to the laboratory in silence.

ONE OF THE skills that Grayner had bothered to acquire was that of grinding his own diamonds, instead of depending on having the work done outside. He had gone into the matter with a thoroughness that was natural to him, and had found that certain cuts, which for undiscoverable reasons had been allowed to disappear from use, gave a far greater effect of brilliance than the ones currently fashionable.

He explained this to Sarah when she showed him one of the stones which had formed the basis of Isaacssohn's report on the refractive index changes in Type III diamonds. She held the stone in a narrow pencil of light and they both had to turn their eyes from the molten brilliance reflected from it. Grayner took the stone and examined it.

“Rose cut,” he said. “A brilliant cut would give you double the fire. And there was a mid-Twentieth century improvement, the Brown-brilliant, that does even better.”

She looked at him with surprise, and with admiration. “We always had our stones cut in Los Angeles. We asked them to give us the best fire they could.”

“Would that be Fransski?” he asked. Sarah nodded. “I once tried to tell him the principles of the brilliant cut, but he very rarely listens to anything. The stones are cut before irradiation, of course? Did you ever try irradiating them first, and then cutting?”

“Yes,” she said. “It goes dead. Whatever form the lattice change takes, it can't be very stable. In fact, there's very likely a natural breakdown, though we haven't come across it yet. That stone I've just demonstrated was our first—about fifteen months ago. It seems all right. Anyway, grinding pressures break it down.”

Grayner nodded. “Not surprising. And the battery—a simple heat—electricity conversion? What about shielding?”

“Sapphire.”

“Yes. Just what was it needed ironing out, Sarah?”

“A lot of things. The shielding's a long way from being perfect, and the mirror system is still primitive. In fact, there's only the idea so far. All the development has to be done. It's more complex than most people realize.”

Grayner turned over the small diamond in his hand, examining it. “The development . . . yes, I get that.” He looked at Sarah. “Imagine for a moment that you are running United Chemicals. You get something like this under-way. You—lose your research man, but the thing has reached

this stage anyway. What do you do next?"

"Turn it over to the engineers. It's obvious, isn't it?"

Charles nodded. "Extremely obvious. You certainly don't get another research man in to do what has been done already. So the question remains—why me? Surely not consideration for my health. Can you think of a reason why they haven't turned this over to Design Section?"

"No. I wondered about it while Hans was alive. I asked him what he thought about it."

"And he said?"

"He had a poor opinion of the people at Graz," Sarah said. "As far as I could gather, he thought they just didn't understand what we were doing. It seems difficult to believe."

"Quite possible, though, I'm afraid. Hans"—he saw her glance at him with pleasure—"would know more about their reactions than you or I. I suppose you didn't see his confidential reports?"

She pointed towards the microfilm files. "Only those on work done. But not the actual memoranda to Nikko-Tsi."

"And the memoranda, are they on file?" Grayner asked.

"They were, but Contact Section took them."

He shook his head. "Not that it matters a great deal. I don't think there's anything I can do but piece the picture together, and

then send it in with a recommendation that they push it through to Detroit or Milan."

Sarah said slowly, "I hope you won't make up your mind too quickly."

"Why?"

"If things have got to the point where they can't even recognize a fundamental job like this when it's thrust under their noses, I'm not sure that it's going to help passing it on to Design Section. I think Hans was quite happy at the prospect of carrying it through here, on our own."

"We haven't the equipment necessary—or the staff."

"We could probably do it, though," Sarah said. She was not looking at him as she said this, but out of the windows towards the Pacific.

He thought with satisfaction: *at least, as long as I am here, things aren't going to be too bad.* The hostility seemed to have disappeared entirely. But although it was a relief to have the prospect of friendly cooperation in the work, he still did not see how he could do anything but hand over to those people who were really qualified to complete the job.

"I shan't need to make up my mind for a few days, anyway," he said. "I shall have to get the hang of things properly before I can recommend anything."

"You could try the irradiation out on a brilliant-cut stone," she

said. "Do you think you could possibly get some from Saginaw?"

He smiled inwardly at the naive determination to get him involved in a continuance of research. "Yes," he said, "I imagine Raoul Casey will send them on if I ask him. He always thought the importation of a scaife was another sign of my mental instability. In fact, I could have the scaife and the other equipment sent here, too. It will never be used where it is."

"Yes, there wouldn't be any harm in doing that," Sarah said. "I'd like you to have a look at the plan for the selenium rectifier. I've had some ideas which I've incorporated into the scheme as Hans left it."

Without waiting for his reply, Sarah flicked the lights off and dropped a microfilm in the reader. The telescreen on the wall lit up. She demonstrated with a pointer on the small inset screen in the bench, drawing circles round the salient points—circles which, reproduced on the big screen, glowed for perhaps a minute before fading out.

"This is the original scheme. I thought if we made this linkage"—two ellipses joined and became a circle—"and cut out the third stage here . . ."

She pressed a button and a new print appeared on the screen. "It would look like this. That should boost it."

"Yes," Charles said. "That's a

pretty piece of work. Very pretty. I'm going to have my own work cut out to keep up with you."

Looking at her as she stood in the shadows beyond the narrow beam of light Grayner thought he saw her flush.

"Thank you," she said. "Hans left most of this side of things to me."

"I imagine I shall do the same," Charles said.

#### IV

THOSE FEW OF the twenty first century managerialists who had the necessary curiosity wondered occasionally why TV should continue to be flat when cinema was so whole-heartedly three-dimensional. The two media were both under Telecom, which made the discrepancy more puzzling.

Actually the question had, in the first place, gone right up to the Council of Managerials. The Telecom Directors had wanted three-dimensional TV, but they had lost their case. Psycho and Medicine had put it most forcibly that TV, if given equal advantages with cinema, would drive the latter out, and there were a number of good reasons why the habit of outside and specialized entertainment should be maintained.

So, on the Sunday following his arrival, Grayner dropped his gyro into the cinepark in San Miguel, and helped Sarah out. The roof

slid to above them, shutting out the driving rain which was, in any case, evaporated by thermo-equipment long before it reached the ground level. Grayner could buy tickets for the three highest grades of seats. He got the best and they lay side by side on airfoam cushions in the center of the bridge balcony that arched midway across the cinema.

While they waited for the film to be shown, Sarah rolled about, pressing herself deep into the airfoam, stretching her limbs against its resilience. Charles watched her with some amusement. She caught his eye.

"I've never been in these before," she said. "I came sometimes with Hans, but our natural frugality made us take the C seats."

"Then you don't know all their advantages?" Grayner suggested. He pressed a button, and the walls dropped down on either side of them, effectively screening them from the sight of people on either side as they were already screened from people in the inferior seats.

Sarah leaned across unhurriedly and pressed the release button. The walls ran up again. "I know of them," she said.

Grayner had proposed the cinema on finding that Sarah was as fond of re-makes as he was himself. Re-makes were the recreation of pictures of historical value with as close a fidelity as was

consonant with transposition to 3D-color-realism. The present program had two re-makes—'La Femme du Boulanger' and 'A Night at the Opera.'

They enjoyed the first but the second bored them. They had both seen originals of the Marx Brothers, on the small postcard screen, and the actors who now scrupulously mimicked them paled by comparison. They had a bond of criticism; they came off the bridge in a warm glow of companionship.

When the gyro started through the opened roof, it lifted into a clear sky, whose blue seemed to glisten after the rain. He brought the gyro down on a grassed ledge about four hundred feet above sea-level, looking over the plain towards San Miguel, the laboratory, and the distant frieze of the ocean. The grass was short, probably sheep-cropped, but still wet from the storm. Charles threw a plastic sheet across it and they sat down.

He turned to look at her fully. It was only three days since they had met, but he could no longer be satisfied simply with having as little trouble as possible in the work they were to do together. It was important that she should not be tormented by false worries.

"Sarah, there's something I've been wanting to say. There's no reason at all why anyone should have killed Hans. It couldn't do any of the managerials any good.

Why should United Chemicals kill him, since he was working for them? As for the others, if it were simply a question of eliminating an advantage held by UC, why give UC the chance of putting someone like myself in, and enabling me to pick the threads up from you? If it were *that* kind of set-up, you would have gone too."

"It's no good, Charles," she said. "I know there's something wrong. That's a conviction. And by knowing I mean really knowing, not just accepting intellectually . . . But let's not talk about it now. Let's just enjoy ourselves."

Watching her, Grayner reflected that there was no trace of former nervousness and awkwardness. And in their place, naturalness and charm were very prominent indeed. It reflected the ease she had begun to feel in their companionship. It reflected something more, too—something that included provocation.

Grayner was far from unwilling to be provoked. It was a long time since he had felt anything resembling his present state of mind. He had thought that state of mind had been adequately canalized in his visits to the P&M Houses. Apparently it had not. Confident of not being unwelcome, he reached leisurely out to embrace her.

Sarah pulled her body away, eluding him. Awkwardly he half-rolled, half-plunged after her, and

managed to obtain an arm. To his astonishment, she slapped him sharply across the face with her free hand. He sat up and looked at her.

She began laughing, and broke off. "If you could only see how funny you look, Charles!"

"I can imagine it. What the devil . . ."

"There are still some women in the world who find it very hard to be promiscuous at a moment's notice."

"How long notice do you require?"

"It's difficult to say," said Sarah. "Long enough for you to be able to rule the idea out of your immediate calculations. Shall we leave it at that?"

His face felt hot. He rubbed it. He was both annoyed and pleased. He had, in the past, deliberately chosen the Houses in preference to the promiscuity which was available about him, and had, on the whole, been willing to accept the popular view that such a choice represented a perversity on his part. He was not so sure of that now.

"I suppose we must, if you say so. I should have thought that in three years you might have gotten more—more into the managerial swing."

"I've led a sheltered life. Remember I've been with protective fellow-Israelis all the time—first my father and then Hans.

My opportunities have been limited."

"I'll try not to let them remain so," said Charles.

"I suppose you will," Sarah said, as she raised herself on one elbow, resting her body against him, the other elbow on his shoulder. Charles stayed quite still, aware of her warmth and softness.

She shifted away slowly and then stood up, smiling. "Enough for one day, I think. You might find it too exciting. Shall we think of getting back?"

During the following week they had a couple of other outings together, and Grayner was looking forward to the weekend. He made some vague suggestion on Thursday night when they were flying back from a trip to the Gulf.

Sarah shook her head—possibly regretfully, but very firmly. "This is my Berkeley week. I go up to spend a couple of days with Daddy once a month. Sorry."

She had told him she would be returning fairly late on Sunday evening, and he had put the gyro at her disposal. Deliberately he stayed away from the laboratory all Sunday afternoon and evening. He hoped Sarah would be back by the time he returned himself.

It was after twenty-three when he garaged his limousine, and saw that there was no light from any of Sarah's windows. She might have gone to bed as soon as she returned, of course, but it would

be rather surprising if she had. Grayner went to his own suite, trying hard not to worry.

He told himself that there could be a hundred reasons why she should decide to stay with her father overnight and come back in the morning. He might be ill—anything. Grayner, feeling reassured, showered, went to bed, and slept until the trumpets of *Cosy Bright* woke him to a sight of an Alpine dawn sprawled across his bedroom wall.

He called Sarah as soon as he was dressed. She herself had several times casually dropped in on him without warning, but he was not used to that kind of informality. The screen stayed blank. He let the call stay on for five minutes, in case she should be getting dressed or in the shower, and then accepted the fact that she still hadn't got back.

He glanced apprehensively at his finger-watch. It was past eight. Even if Sarah had stayed overnight she should have got back by now, or at least called him up to explain why.

Grayner found her father's frequency in his micro-file, and put the number on call. The call was accepted almost at once. The bronzed, typically Israeli features of a man of about sixty—tall, a little stooped—came into focus. He had a friendly smile, but with a hint of slyness. He spoke with a slight accent.



Cohn said, "Yes? You're Official Grayner. We haven't seen each other before. Wish you well."

There was a constriction at the back of Grayner's throat. He said sharply, "Is Sarah—your daughter—there? I'd like to speak to her."

Professor Cohn's face tightened; he seemed to straighten fractionally. He said quietly, "She left me yesterday in the early evening—to go back to your laboratory. She has not arrived?"

"No." Charles was scared, and he rapped the questions out with involuntary sharpness. "Exactly what time did she leave? Did she say anything about stopping anywhere on the way? Did you notice the battery reading?"

"She left a little after six—eighteen, that is—she wanted to get back early, she told me. She said nothing about stopping anywhere. The battery was charged. On the Saturday we had it charged, and we did not use it—the gyro." He paused. "What should I do, Official Grayner?"

"I'll get onto Telecom right away," Charles said. "Don't worry. She's probably had to ditch the gyro somewhere in the wilds. You can sleep in a gyro quite comfortably. I'll call you back as soon as I get hold of something."

He broke off without waiting for more than the beginning of Professor Cohn's reply. "Yes. I hope—" He got through to the

Telecom Recovery Section. The screen showed a yawning fat woman, clearly interested in nothing but the arrival of the day relief shift.

He said brusquely, "UC Laboratory seventy-nineteen, San Miguel. Official Grayner. We have a member of our staff missing. Assistant Sarah Cohn. Missing between Berkeley and here last evening on a gyro flight. Have you anything on her?"

The fat woman looked at him with bored and drooping eyes. "Almost swear not. We haven't had a gyro pick-up in a month. Hold it, anyway, while I check Field."

Charles held on impatiently. Finally, she reported back. "Nothing has come through," she said. "I'll send it out on a rescue call. Berkeley, you said? To San Miguel?"

"Yes. You'll send a report in as soon as you get hold of something?"

She nodded. "You better flash her record-film to us, just in case."

"It's not here," he said. "But I'll get it and I'll call you."

Charles made the call to Telecom again, when he'd found Sarah's record-film.

"You weren't long," the fat woman said. "Got the R.F.? Put it through."

The screen blanked for a minute or two while the automatic

took over, photographing the record-film. Then the woman returned again.

"That's okay." She smiled with a hint of malice. "Now I understand the rush. We'll try and locate her for you. It's a story for the telezine boys at that—beautiful girl scientist lost in gyro. You'll have them around fast."

Telecom always carried more weight than they were worth. In any case he must rely on Telecom for letting him have any news that came in promptly.

He said, "We're restricted. Would you tell them that?"

As she said, "Surely," he switched off.

His next call was to Mettrill in Los Angeles. It was a necessary notification. He had been through to Mettrill only once before—a formal call on his taking over the laboratory. Mettrill was the avuncular type and Charles was quite sure that his slow, friendly, eager-to-help surface masked a typical file-and-forget lazy mind. This news made him sit up, though, and look irritated. It was something that was going to demand action.

Mettrill said, "You checked with her father?"

"Yes," said Charles. "She left with a full battery, just after eighteen."

Mettrill looked at him thoughtfully. "How did she come to be using a gyro?"

"I loaned her mine," Charles said.

"Why?"

"I wasn't using it—to save her trouble. Otherwise it would have meant a taxi into San Diego and meeting the air schedules and the rest of it. She's a qualified flyer."

"She was, anyway." It was the casualness rather than the finality of the remark that made Grayner want to hit him. "I advise you to stick to regulations, Official Grayner. It saves everybody trouble in the end, even if it means a little extra trouble in the short run."

"Yes."

Mettrill stirred in his chair. "What's her file number?"

Grayner gave it to him. He watched Mettrill scrawl it down. He said, "I was wondering . . .?"

Mettrill said, "Yes?" without looking up.

"If I could have another gyro sent up. I thought I might go out and have a look for her myself."

Mettrill looked up now. He fixed his gaze thoughtfully on Charles. "We'll see about the gyro replacement. But stay where you are. Contact will have to drop in on you."

"I could make an appointment for them and still have time."

"Stay where you are. You have work to do. We'll see about the gyro replacement—the other replacement, too."

*The other replacement* could only refer to Sarah. Charles said,

with a rising of anger, "Won't you at least say: But we hope it won't be necessary?"

Mettrill continued to stare at him. "Two thirds of the direct route between your place and Berkeley is over the ocean. I don't see any point whatsoever in making your suggested addition to my original remark. Stay on hand, Official Grayner. Contact will be seeing you." Mettrill's hand came forward to break, and then stopped. "And don't get in touch with anyone else about this. Telecom, for instance."

Charles tightened his lips. "The first call I made after hearing from Professor Cohn was to Telecom, to see if she had been picked up."

Mettrill leaned back and clasped his hands behind his balding head. For a moment he was silent. Then he said, "When I was a young man, I did one thing thoroughly. I learned the regulations. It was the most useful thing I ever did, and I suggest it's not too late for you to do the same. There's always a reason for the regulations."

"This might have been a matter of life and death."

Mettrill glanced away. "I'll note that as your excuse. What did you get at Telecom—Recovery?"

"Yes," said Charles. He didn't give a damn, at that moment, about anything except savaging Mettrill. "They had Assistant

Cohn's record-film. I gathered they were putting it through to TV. I informed them this place was restricted. They were going to contact you."

"Official Grayner," Mettrill said, "you're an incompetent fool. I'm breaking off. Stay where you are."

Grayner put his callscreen on alarm before he went out. He went to the laboratory first. Luke and Tony were on some routine work Sarah had put in hand. He told them what had happened. Then, not able to concentrate on the work he was supposed to be doing, he went outside. It was very quiet. There was no sound but that of the sea, washing without haste against the rocks.

What eventually made him retrace his steps was the gyro, its noise first heard above the heavy whisper of the waves and then the sight of it, side-slipping down towards the back of the laboratory. He walked quickly, because there was even a faint hope that it might be Sarah.

There were two men. They wore the usual plastoleather jerkins and the tag, Contact Section, beneath their UC badges. One was very short and bandy; the other was of average build, with red hair forming a fiery halo round a conspicuously bald top. It was this one who nodded amiably towards Charles.

"You Grayner? My name's Cas-

ton. Ann this is Walt Stenner."

Charles took them into his living suite. Caston looked around openly and casually, Stenner with covert attention.

"What happened to all the water-colors of the Sea of Galilee and Mount Hebron?" Caston inquired.

Charles said slowly, "They're in my assistant's rooms." He added, "There hasn't been any news?"

"I gather you passed it on to Telecom Recovery," Caston said. "We're leaving it to them. Anyway, they're better equipped for that kind of thing."

"Mettrill seemed rather annoyed about my passing it on."

"Mettrill," Caston observed, "is so eager to avoid trouble that he goes around inventing it. He's weak-willed, too. He had to get us to put the blinkers on the telezine boys. I guess you won't be bothered by them—unless you had been looking forward to the publicity?"

"No," Grayner said, "I hadn't." He looked at Caston. "You know this part of the country better than I do. Tell me, what do you think the chances are?"

Caston shrugged. "I guess there's a chance. She might be knocked out somewhere, alive but too injured to get clear. Slim chance, though. The sea's more likely. She was a nice wench at that."

Charles said tensely, "But why? Why should she have crashed? The gyro was in good order."

"In my experience," Caston said, "there's always something that can go wrong—generally three or four things. Height gauge, maybe. Showing two thousand and then—wham! you hit the ocean. Or a blackout—people have blackouts." Caston glanced obliquely at Grayner. "Seemed too, she was quite a bit cut up about the accident your predecessor had."

There was a brief silence.

"I suppose it's occurred to you that, whatever happened," Charles said, "the accident rate for personnel in this establishment has taken a very sharp upward jump? It looks like a remarkable coincidence to me that peculiar accidents should happen to both a Research Official and his assistant within a two-week period—and the blame on the sea each time."

Caston seemed to be bored. "You got a better solution?"

"This place is restricted."

Caston walked across and examined the books Charles had on a shelf. He said over his shoulder; "You read books? My old man used to read books. Tried one or two myself once, but it never seemed worth the trouble. Restricted? Just about every goddam tinpot laboratory in this half of the continent is restricted."

Stenner's dry voice said, "Are you suggesting that another managerial has—taken action against Isaacssohn and Cohn? Is the work you are doing here of that order of importance?"

Grayner hesitated. "The importance or otherwise of the work seems less important than the coincidence."

"In our line," Caston said, "we can't afford to be impressed by coincidence. If another managerial did think it might be a good idea to write those two off—why not both together? Why wait till you move in before completing the job?"

"I don't know." Charles paused. "They might have thought it would be more convincing this way."

Stenner smiled austerely. "We can assure you that there would be no difficulty about making a double disposal look like a simple accident. No trouble at all."

"Tell me, Grayner," Caston said. "In your own experience would you expect a really balanced person to go around seeing murder in the fact that a guy gets drowned at sea? You're upset, of course, when it's someone you know, but why drag murder in? We're the police and we were satisfied."

"You may be right, of course," Charles said. "It is your job, not mine. If they don't—don't find my assistant, then, you will simply

write the case off? You aren't going into it at all?"

"Contact Section," Stenner said, "will check the other end naturally. It may be her father will be able to give us something."

"I should like to meet Professor Cohn, too," Charles said. "Would there be any objection to my coming up to Berkeley with you?"

The two Contact Section men exchanged glances. It confirmed the view Charles had already formed of their relations when Stenner replied.

"It isn't altogether usual," Stenner said, "but I don't see any real objection. From our point of view, that is. As far as your being away from the laboratory is concerned . . . I suppose Mettrill would not object to that?"

*The hell with Mettrill*, Charles thought. He said flatly, "No. There will be no objection from that quarter."

Stenner picked up his gauntlets. "In that case . . ."

"I thought I might call Professor Cohn first—if you were thinking of going right up there? And I should like to see if there's anything from Telecom Recovery. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead," Stenner told him. He went over to the window, pulling his gauntlets on. Caston, with an air of being fascinated, had gone back to studying Charles' row of books. Grayner walked

across to the control panel, and called Telecom.

The girl on Recovery Inquiries was a little more prepossessing, but just as uninterested.

"Nothing in," she said. "We'll call you if something turns up."

"I'm leaving here." Grayner gave her Professor Cohn's number. "Send any news you get through there, will you? And gently, please—it's her father."

The girl yawned. "We are trained in public relations."

She broke off, and he put through the call to Berkeley. It came through immediately.

"Wish you well," Professor Cohn said. "Have you news?"

"Not yet," Charles answered. He jerked his head back, indicating the two figures in the background of the room. "These two gentlemen I have with me are from Contact Section. They propose coming up to Berkeley to see you, and I've begged a place in their gyro. It will be all right, I take it?"

Professor Cohn nodded. "For me, you will understand, there is nothing that matters now. When such blows are dealt and one is young, there is perhaps good to be gained from them. At my age, no. My dear friend and my daughter . . ." He broke off, perhaps at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry," Charles said helplessly. "But there may still be news."

The Professor shook his head. "One hopes, but one comes to know when hope has lost its meaning."

## V

ON THE TRIP north Caston and Stenner were simply two Contact Officials on a routine job, with an extra passenger. They stopped for a meal at Los Angeles, and it was late afternoon before they began slipping down through the grey sky to the sprawl of Berkeley.

To the north of the campus, smoke drifted away from the rocket-pits—the unassimilable residue of blasting. The sky flamed orange red at another rocket take-off, and then faded back to grey. The gyro dropped to the roof of the lodge where Professor Cohn had his suite. The three of them climbed out stiffly, and found the elevator.

Cohn was on the second floor. Caston buttoned the callscreen panel. There was no reply. He buttoned again, and then, without waiting any longer, produced a whistle-master from one of his pockets. He whistled a complicated series of notes, breaking off when the door slid open before them.

The two Contact men moved purposefully into the suite, Grayner following them. Caston came up with the note, inside a couple

of minutes. It was on the permapad beside the callscreen panel in the living room. He gestured, and Charles and Stenner came over.

The note was badly scrawled. It read: *I am sorry. Perhaps I should have waited. But with age one becomes selfish—at least in small things.*

Caston said, "Clear enough. But how? You checked the bathroom, didn't you?"

Stenner was buttoning on the panel. He said, "How? I'd say the usual. What do you expect in a place like Berkeley."

Caston's face cleared in understanding as the screen showed the long Inquiry counter with the Interplanetary motif running along the backwall. "I guess so," he said.

Stenner said sharply, "Contact Section, United Chemicals. Put me on to the Pits Manager. It's urgent."

The order was obeyed with Interplanetary's usual efficiency. The Pits Manager was a small, round, anxious-looking man.

"Contact Section, United Chemicals," Stenner introduced himself again. "Will you please check the pits at once for a potential suicide? Professor Cohn, of this University."

"Herman? My God!"

He was already busy putting the call through on his side screen.

"You know him?" Stenner asked.

"Quite well. And he's been here this afternoon."

"We'll come right over," Stenner said. "Breaking off."

The Pits Manager had gone down to Pit 17, and they were taken there to join him. When he saw them he pointed mutely into the pit. The super-refractory base and sides were still smouldering, and the heat, rising thirty feet to the pit lip, was unbearable.

Caston said, "Well? Too late?"

"The JA Nine blasted twenty minutes ago. He was here not long before. The Supervisor saw him."

Caston nodded.

Grayner said, "Were there any traces?"

Caston laughed. "That a UC man should ask that! You know what the temperatures are down there, at blasting? Maybe a spectroscope would show some surface impurities in the refractory; and maybe again it wouldn't." He swung to the Manager. "How did he get down there?"

The manager pointed along the pit; a service-crane was now swung clear of the pit.

The Manager said, "The Supervisor found it swung into the pit. He thought the last service crew had left it that way. They shouldn't, but they do. So he simply had it swung out again, and approved the blasting in the usual way."

Stenner spoke. "I was under

the impression that you people had put additional safeguards into operation, following the Mura-Ti report. There have been other suicides." He used a stinging tone of voice, and the little man seemed stung by it.

"Anyone coming into here has to be known or vouched for. We can't put mechanical safeguards in. The rockets have got to go off on schedule."

"Who vouched for Cohn?" Caston asked.

"I would had I been asked. I used to play chess with him. I wasn't asked because the Supervisor knew him, too. He was known all over Berkeley. I still don't get it. He wasn't the kind to act like this."

Caston said, "Did he tell you that his daughter was missing on her gyro flight back to San Miguel?"

The Manager looked down to the smouldering pit. "So that was it," he said slowly. "No, he didn't tell me that. You don't imagine that if he had . . ." He let it hang.

BACK AT THE campus Grayner began thinking about Professor Cohn, once again admitting his own limitations as a judge of character. He had imagined him insincere. Now the stark realization of the man's utter sincerity came home to him, and brought another and even starker realization.

Part of his mind had clung to the hope of Sarah being found—injured, perhaps, but alive. Seeing the extent of her father's despair, it was no longer possible to keep even that faint flicker of hope alive.

The two Contact men moved quickly and efficiently around the suite. Charles found a microfilm labelled *Sarah—Two to Twenty*, and slipped it into his pocket. He was glancing through the Professor's small library—with little advantage since the books were all in German—when a call came through. Half an hour before he would have gone to the control panel with some renewal of hope, but there was none now.

The panel flashed: COHN FROM ALLIED ELECTRICAL—BERKELEY REPAIR AND SERVICE . . . COHN FROM ALLIED ELECTRICAL—BERKELEY REPAIR—

Charles accepted the call automatically. It was from a young man.

"Call for Cohn," the young man said.

Charles looked at him. "Professor Cohn is not available."

"Not Professor Cohn. His daughter—Research Assistant Cohn."

"Not available," Charles said again. To hide the pain, from himself as much as from the face on the screen, he said, "Do you want her for any particular reason?"

The young man shrugged.



"Routine notification. We always notify forty-eight hours after receipt of servicing jobs. She left a watch for re-charging on Saturday. She said she would pick it up from the automat delivery on Sunday morning. It's still with us. Can you inform her? It starts collecting storage charges from today."

Grayner said quietly, "May I see the watch?"

"I don't see why not." He held up a small, familiar finger-watch. "Well?"

The relief, the happiness, was welling up and would not be controlled. Charles laughed, to the young man's astonishment.

"I'll try to get your message through to her," he told him. "Breaking off now."

Caston and Stenner came in from the next room.

"You found something good?" Caston said. "A pornofilm maybe?"

Charles told them of the call. Stenner listened attentively.

Caston said disgustedly, "That all? If she isn't dead, where is she?"

Charles' face was grim.

"Assume you are Contact in another managerial—Atomics, for the sake of argument—and you're told to kidnap the girl. You make it look like a gyro crash—suicide, maybe—and you put up a good show. You cover all the facts that you could reasonably be expected

to cover. But there's something you can't cover."

"And that is?" Stenner asked.

"The little items you don't know about," said Grayner. "The fact that her watch may have needed recharging, and that she may have put it in for service without mentioning it to anyone. Without mentioning it even to her father. According to him, she left quite normally on Sunday evening on her way, as he thought, to my lab. But if she left on Sunday evening, why didn't she pick the watch up from automat delivery on Sunday morning, as she had told the Service people she would?"

"Because she forgot," Caston said promptly."

"She had my gyro," Charles said. "The clock's been broken since before I took it over. Do you take a several hundred mile trip without having the time on you?"

"I get your point, Grayner," Stenner said. "But the mind that has set itself on suicide is necessarily a confused one. The girl forgot to collect the watch. Or perhaps she even remembered, and realized that for her time had ceased to be important."

"If time had ceased to be important, why put the watch in for recharging?" Charles asked.

"We haven't," Stenner pointed out, "established the point at which suicide was determined on."

"Assistant Cohn," Charles said flatly, "did not commit suicide. There is no reason to think she is dead. If it comes to that, there is no reason to think her father is dead. Or my predecessor, Hans Isaacssohn. You are recording three deaths, and you haven't got a single body—not even a trace of a body."

Caston began to say something, but Stenner silenced him with a small gesture. "This idea of yours of kidnapping," Stenner said, "are you taking that seriously?"

"It strikes me," Charles said defensively, "as at least as plausible as this multiplication of suicide. I should most certainly say it was worth looking into."

"If it were a kidnapping business," Stenner said, "there is a long gap between Isaacssohn and the girl. If the girl was kidnapped from here, then your watch factor puts the kidnapping between Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning. But her father told you she left on her return journey on Sunday afternoon. Well? Did he arrange for his daughter's kidnapping?"

Charles did not say anything.

"Now there's the matter of your feeling about the case," Stenner went on. "You are not an Israeli, of course, but your mental patterns are interesting. By error you were fixed in a dead-end research post, and it could not be expected that there would not be traces of

this in your subsequent behaviour. Some reaction was inevitable, and in fact your reaction was antisocial."

Charles stiffened, and Stenner looked at him. "Only mildly so," he went on quickly. "You did your job efficiently, developed no friendships—most significantly, no close relations with women. You patronized the Houses, although you had no sexual abnormality and could have had affairs with women in the normal way. You began to read and collect books—books, moreover, that were unconnected with your own subject.

"You collected gramophone records of the pre-managerial era. You viewed Channel KF, and in other respects showed an unmistakable psychological resistance to TV."

Stenner paused. Grayner, considering the weight of the indictment levelled against him, still said nothing.

"It is interesting," Stenner continued, "that you were conforming to a pattern of intellectualism that is typically Israeli and, to that extent, reactionary. The accident of Isaacssohn's death and the need for replacing with another diamond man brought you into a typically Israeli circle—where your predecessor had been and your assistant was ex-Israeli.

"You, Grayner, were bound to have a subconscious orientation both towards your dead predeces-

sor and towards the girl. The latter, since you are heterosexual, would attract more powerfully. On the basis of your psychoplan and hers, in another month you would have become infatuated by her. As it is, the attraction has been so strong that you are powerfully influenced towards a refusal to accept the fact of her death. Detroit Contact should never have passed you for Isaacssohn's job."

Charles said, "Infatuated? I *am* in love with her, if that's what you mean. I've come to realize that during the course of the day."

Caston, moving restlessly about the room, pulled at one of Professor Cohn's books and a dozen of them cascaded to the floor. He stared at them, poking one with his foot.

"Books," Caston said. "What a set-up. This is the biggest nest of queers we've had this year." The remark was clearly enough directed at Charles.

Stenner said, "The shock probably precipitated your new state of mind. You know what the sensible thing to do is—go to Psycho and Med. They can put you on the high-mesc course, and a holiday trip. A trip would certainly help you, and from your records, you're due one."

"Thanks," Charles said. "I'll think about it. I take it you have made up your mind that I lack mental balance in believing Sarah

is still alive. As far as you are concerned, she's dead?"

"Missing," Stenner said. "Presumed dead."

"I should like, if you permit, to put my view to a higher echelon, and not to Mettrill. I've rubbed him badly already. I should prefer to see my old Manager—George Ledbetter at Detroit."

"I think we can manage that for you," Stenner said. "I very much doubt whether Ledbetter will query our findings, but it may help your own orientation to see him."

"Fairly soon?"

"Tomorrow," said Stenner. "Will that suit you?"

"Very well. Just one other thing, then. It's hardly worth my going south to the laboratory just for the night. Can you give me an authorization to stay on here?"

Stenner looked at him thoughtfully. "Here—in the Cohn apartment?" he asked.

Charles nodded.

"I guess so," said Stenner. "You understand it goes down in your record as another symptom of irrational fixation on this group of ex-Israelis?"

"I shall have to live that down," Charles said. "Or learn to live with it."

Some of his confidence went when the two Contact men left him. He walked round the small suite of rooms as restlessly as

Caston had done, picking things up and putting them down in much the same way. He found wine in the old Colonial sideboard—Israeli wine. How could the Professor have managed that kind of luxury on his salary at the University? But Sarah probably bought it for him, or one of his local friends. Cohn seemed to have plenty.

Grayner slept that night in the small room, looking over the lawns, that had been Sarah's on her visits. There were touching signs of the occasional feminine occupancy. A china doll, somewhat battered by the years, sat on the bedside table. Presumably it had watched over a much smaller Sarah, years ago, in a distant land. His eyes were on it as he drifted into sleep. Obsessive infatuation, was his last conscious thought.

Stenner called him in the morning and gave him the authorization to see Ledbetter. His face on the screen was as remote and ironical as ever. "If Ledbetter shows any disposition towards taking you back for work at Detroit, I recommend you give it earnest consideration."

"Thank you," Charles said. "I'll remember that."

"I have to tell you, by the way," Stenner said, "that Telecom Recovery's calling off the search for Assistant Cohn at midday today. The comparatively small land

area concerned has been well covered, and there's nothing to be hoped for from the sea."

"Thank you."

"I hope you weren't upset at all by my analysis yesterday. You had made it necessary, of course, by persisting in this theory of yours."

"It is I who should apologize for getting in your way—and for adding to your nest of queers."

Stenner smiled. "Caston's a good man in his way, but something of a fool. Confidentially, I read Shakespeare myself. I like the feel of paper . . . Breaking off. Enjoy yourself in Detroit."

GRAYNER TOOK the stratoliner, and was in Detroit by eleven. He took a gyro-taxi direct to the UC building, and made himself known at Inquiries. The girl looked at her record board.

"You are to go down right away," she said. "Mr. Ledbetter is expecting you."

Ledbetter rose to meet Charles as he entered the room and waved him to a chair. "Well, for such a short stay, you've managed to run into plenty of trouble," he said.

"A certain amount of murder and sudden death," said Charles.

Ledbetter looked startled. "What? Oh, I see. No, I wasn't thinking of that." He held up a couple of reports. "I meant these. 'Failure to comply with Regulations twenty-nine and forty-two.'"

You notified the fact of your assistant being missing to an outside source before getting in touch with Mettrill, after previously giving her the use of your gyro, again without higher confirmation. You left your laboratory without getting in touch with Mettrill. And there are other things . . ."

Ledbetter put down the reports and looked at Grayner. "There's another report from Contact which refers to your mental attitude. I gather that some of this has already been explained to you. You did the right thing in coming to me. I'm not promising, but there's a chance I may be able to acquire extra-territorial rights in your Pacific Coast place. That would make you directly answerable to me for Administration. Reports would go through Nikko-Tsi, of course, as before. Also, Grayner, I could use that tie-up for the odd trip to see you out there, and get a little yachting in. Well? How does it strike you?"

"Favorably," Charles said. "You're being very helpful. But it wasn't precisely my future that I came to talk about."

"No?" Ledbetter said. "All right. I've had Stenner's report. I've got some of it. You might as well let me have the rest."

Charles went through the report for him, carefully. When he had finished, Ledbetter commented, "Is that all?"

"That's all."

Ledbetter stubbed his cigarette out, half-smoked, and began to play with his aromofact. On the wall a scene of giant pines began to unroll steadily towards a clouded sunset. Their scent came in gusts, mixed with a dozen other bucolic perfumes. Ledbetter watched for a moment or two. He returned his gaze at last to Grayner.

"Naturally the report from Stenner made me curious," he said. "I sent a flip to Nikko-Tsi. I explained the situation briefly, and put a question to him: could I be told what work it was Isaacssohn had been doing and which you were to continue—or if the information was top restricted, could I pass you on to Graz for their handling? I did not feel I would be competent to handle things myself. I had the reply printed. Would you care to see it?"

Grayner nodded. Ledbetter brought out a sheet of paper, and passed it across the desk. Charles took it. It ran:

REFERENCE LABORATORY 719,  
SAN MIGUEL. ESTABLISHMENT  
ENGAGED ON ROUTINE WORK INTO  
POSSIBILITY OF NEW POWER  
SOURCE CONNECTED WITH IRRADI-  
ATED DIAMOND. RESTRICTED ON  
BASIS OF INITIAL REPORTS FROM  
ISAACSSOHN. SUBSEQUENT RE-  
PORTS HAVE NOT DEVELOPED  
PROMISE OF FIRST. QUESTION OF  
CONTINUANCE OR RE-ROUTING OF

THIS RESEARCH WILL COME UP AT NEXT APPROPRIATE COUNCIL MEETING. GRAYNER TO BE RETURNED TO POST PENDING FULL CONSIDERATION OF POSITION. YOUR DISCRETION TO HANDLE. NIKKO-TSI.

Grayner read the message through two or three times, while he collected his thoughts. *Subsequent reports have not developed promise of first.* Something was wrong; badly wrong.

There were three possibilities. That Isaacsohn had somehow, for some reason, not submitted correct reports to Graz. That Graz was engaged in some tortuous course of deceit which involved putting one of their own Managers off the scent. Or that the flip from Nikko-Tsi was a private forgery of Ledbetter's.

Charles pushed the message back. Ledbetter seemed too amiable, too anxious *not* to embarrass him. He tried fitting himself into Ledbetter's position.

"What reason could there be to justify kidnapping?" Ledbetter asked. "There are several managerialists who would stick at very little if they thought there really was something that would give them the advantage. I haven't forgotten the little shot Atomics had at—shall we say, centralization?—a few years ago. Or the Hydroponics—Argiculture combination in the Thirty-six famine. But

what is there in this for anyone?" His hand pulled at his long chin.

Temporizing, Grayner said, "I don't know." He hesitated, summoning up his next words. "I won't conceal the fact that my assistant—Sarah Cohn—made a very great impression on me."

"It can't be any consolation to you now to be told," said Ledbetter, "that you will get over it—though you will. Work is a useful thing in that respect. I hope the flip I showed you won't put you off the work, just because it hints at the possibility of things being changed. Actually, they will probably carry on under their impetus. You would be surprised if you knew some of the lines of research that have been automatically okayed, year after year."

Charles said, "You want me to go back to the lab?"

"I'm pretty sure I can swing you under my jurisdiction," Ledbetter said. "Mettrill is not the kind to stand on a question of prestige if he sees a chance of less work or less trouble. You will be okay."

"Stenner's advice," Charles said, "was to visit Psycho and Med. He even suggested the prescription, too—a high-mesc course and a holiday trip."

"You can disregard Stenner. You are as sane as he is, and considerably more intelligent."

"As a matter of fact, I could do without the mesc, but there is

something about the holiday trip that appeals."

Ledbetter said emphatically, "Take my advice—work is the best remedy. A holiday trip is no good except to a mind already contented. But I'll let you decide."

He was, Grayner reflected, surrounded by well-wishers—Stenner, Ledbetter . . . Ledbetter especially was rather curiously benevolent. There was an emphasis behind his words that was difficult to believe stemmed entirely from his concern for Charles.

Grayner let a pause rest between them, then he asked, "There wouldn't be any *objection* to my consulting P and M and asking for a break now, would there? I've never had much pleasure out of furloughs in the past. But I can use one now—badly. I will not take more than six months—at the very most."

Ledbetter looked away, as though he had just thought of something. "All right, Charles," he said slowly.

## VI

IT WAS ALMOST obvious that the KF studio had at one time been a brewery. Long low-ceilinged rooms were broken at intervals by peculiar vertical shafts. Grayner found Dinkuhl watching the interior of room 17 through the glass partition.

He came and stood beside him. Grayner touched Dinkuhl's arm; he looked around. "Charlie," he cried. "It's good to see you. I heard you'd joined a procession to the morgue."

"I've come for some more of your excellent advice, Hiram," Charles said. "And for permission to listen in on your grapevine."

Dinkuhl performed his characteristic mocking grin. "Advice is something we always have available. As for the grapevine, I'm not so sure. Come on upstairs, anyway, and I'll get you a drink." He jerked his head towards his room.

In room 17 there were two comfortable chairs. Dinkuhl directed him to one, and went across to a spindly top-heavy Welsh dresser that almost covered one wall. He opened up a cupboard.

"Take what comes?"

"Within reason," said Charles. He watched Dinkuhl pour two glasses and bring them over, together with the bottle, on a tray. "Turnip and tomato again?"

Dinkuhl shook his head. "The real stuff this time. Plum brandy. "Well, now, have you been missing KF?"

"To tell you the truth, I hadn't given it a thought."

"You're a lucky man." Dinkuhl let his nose rest for a moment against the edge of his glass. "Ah. That's a bad business you landed in. Bring me up to date."

"What do you know about it?" asked Charles.

"Nothing," Dinkuhl said blandly. "You tell me."

Charles did. When he had finished, Dinkuhl replenished their glasses a third time. Charles looked at him. "Well?" he asked.

"And your good friends in UC haven't quite succeeded in persuading you that you are suffering from hallucinations?" Dinkuhl asked.

"I had my doubts at times, but I have none now."

"Good boy. I've two objectives—to further anything that looks as though it may sabotage, in the least degree, the managerial world in which we live—and to save my own skin."

Charles grinned. "All right. I'll settle for them."

"Not yet you won't. First I have to justify my seditious attitude." He finished his own glass. "You're not drinking."

"Not at your pace. I don't think I need the justification. I'm more concerned with getting some advice."

Dinkuhl filled his own glass. "The advice can wait. It won't be of an order to require your urgent attention—urgent within the next half hour at any rate. Why do I wish to destroy this world-wide fatherly society of managerials in whose bosom we live? Why indeed?"

"I don't know. Should I?"

"It's the anniversary of the War. . . . I'll ask you another question. Professor Cohn taught History at Berkeley—one of the very few academic institutions which provide tuition in that subject. How many students did he have?"

"Before his disappearance? I believe just two."

"You surprise me. Yes—two. I doubt if there are a score of students reading History in continental North America. This is—historically speaking—an extraordinary state of affairs. Other decadent periods have misread and distorted the history of their origins. Ours is the first to have succeeded in ignoring it altogether."

"Decadent?"

Dinkuhl sighed. "I hoped I shouldn't have to argue about that. You must have been viewing *Red League*. Man conquering the last barrier—Twenty-First Century Man grasping for a new heritage among the Stars—Conquering the Chill Lunar Wastes. But tell me: how long is it since the lunar base was established? You don't remember. It was there when you were a child. Perhaps you can remember when the last attempts were made at Mars and Venus? You should remember them."

Grayner thought. "The Del Marro expedition . . ."

"Over twenty years ago." Dinkuhl glanced at him sardonically. "You were a young man, then,



settling down into your niche at Saginaw. That was Mars. They had ruled Venus out ten years before that."

"The difficulties are very great," said Charles.

"Not so great as they were for the first trip to the Moon. But in any case, we aren't trying any longer. The work has been abandoned as not worth the risk."

"The Moon," Charles pointed out, "hasn't been worth it. Except possibly in terms of astronomical research."

"By which," Dinkuhl said, "you display yourself as a true child of your age. If you are going to calculate that kind of endeavor in terms of profit and loss, then you have failed before you start. No, *that* is real decadence. But, of course, it's a long way from being the only sign. Look at the arts.

"True enough, the last days of capitalism produced nothing that was worth inheriting, but at least they produced *something*. And today we haven't even the saving grace of discrimination to tell us that their stuff isn't worth inheriting. What do you hear on *Honey and Cosy Bright*? 'The Rhapsody in Blue' . . . 'The Blue Danube' . . . 'Chattanooga Chu-Chu' . . . Or, if your taste is for the rarefied heights of *Red League*—Elgar, Stravinsky, Sibelius and Gilbert and Sullivan. And they ring the changes by a series of gimmicks, and even there they repeat them-

selves. That adaptation of the Sibelius Violin Concerto to the Mouth-Organ. There was a run of that kind of foolery when I was a boy.

"People are still surrounded by mid-Twentieth Century neo-Scandinavian furniture, and what few painters there are slavishly follow one or another of the Twentieth Century schools—neo-Impressionists, Cubists, Fauvists—we've got them all. Leisure Group still turn out chunks of stone with holes in them by the thousand."

"Perhaps it's the right kind of art," said Charles.

"There is no right kind of art. And if there were, it certainly wouldn't be this prosaic and unimaginative rubbish. Decadence involves a loss of creative energy in the first place, and eventually a loss of taste. We've touched rock bottom."

"All right," Charles said. "I see why you would like to put a bomb under it all."

Dinkuhl ignored him. "How did things get like this?" He reached for the bottle without pausing and re-filled his own glass. "In the Twentieth Century they knew—those of them that could see any further than their noses—that they were heading for a crash. And they got it, of course. They got the lot—atom bombs, hydrogen bombs, breakdown, disease, famine—the Four Horsemen and a

posse of others trailing behind them. It was the end.

"And before they had time to attune themselves a new society was rising, lifting itself, as far as they could see, by its own bootstraps. Even though people today have succeeded so well in obliterating the memory of their origins, it is generally remembered that Atomics was the first of the managerials, the resurgent center about which the forces of reconstruction gathered. The fact is that communications had become so good that, short of wiping out every small center of population, civilization was bound to recover. And not even all the large centers were wiped out, though few escaped.

"Atomics provided the nucleus of the new grouping of society, and the other managerials grew up around them; under their wing. The obvious ones first—United Chemicals, Agriculture, Hydroponics, Lignin Industries, Telecom, Steel, Mining and the rest; and after them the secondaries: Psycho and Medicine, Genetics Division, Leisure Group, and so on.

"There was a time when Atomics tried to centralize—no, not the recent squeeze: right at the beginning. Had they been wholehearted enough they might have got away with a world dictatorship then. But the opportunity passed and the Council of Managerials was set up and now, as you

know, in theory all managerials are independent and equal and with full sovereign rights. A balance of power."

"One thing I've never understood," Charles said. "How did Israel come to be left out?"

"That," Dinkuhl said, "is part of the larger question—how did men come to abandon their old-established national sovereignties for the new managerial ones? Principally because they felt their national sovereignties were dead and so they could cleave to a new one. But Israel was different. The Israelis had spent nearly nineteen hundred years clutching a nationalism in exile. The managerial world had nothing they could possibly prefer to the concept of the Holy Land. They made good use of the interregnum to expand down to the Nile and up to the Euphrates.

"Today their country is cultivated up to the hilt and for the time being they have caught up with their population increase. Now, unless I am badly mistaken, you will see them go ahead."

"With the aid and comfort of Channel KF?" asked Charles.

Dinkuhl paused in the act of filling the glasses again. "Perhaps, but I had almost forgotten you had a problem too. What objective precisely have you got in view?"

"I should like to establish to my own satisfaction that my view of the recent happenings is

the right one. And I should like to find Sarah Cohn and ask her to marry me."

"Ah," Dinkuhl remarked, "the human side! You do right to bring such little problems to your Uncle Hiram. And what if it should prove that Stenner and Ledbetter happen to have been right for once—what if Sarah Cohn is dead, along with Herman Cohn and Hans Isaacssohn? Do you retire to your little UC niche, and stay a respected and valuable managerial citizen for the remainder of your days?"

After too many glasses of plum brandy, Charles was in a condition which he would have described as relaxed. "Yes," he said. "I imagine so. I'm no crusader, Hiram."

"Well, I suppose we shall have to do what we can for you. Even though, like myself, you are unwilling to risk inconvenience and danger for the sake of humanity, you are willing for the reasons you have given me—right? What's the situation about leave?"

"I've been to P and M. They've given me up to six months leave, and a number of containers of mescaline which I tipped down a drain. I'm taking a trip to the Pacific Islands."

"Got the tickets?"

Grayner patted his notecase pocket.

"Hand them over." Dinkuhl took the transparent plastic enve-

lope containing the small colored plastic cards. "I know someone who will quite enjoy this trip. I would go myself if I didn't have something else to do." He glanced at Charles. "It is important that the tickets should have been used, just in case someone inquires."

"And me," Charles said, surprised. "What do I do?"

"First to my place, for a little plastic make-up and then elsewhere," Dinkuhl said.

"Elsewhere?"

"To see a man," Dinkuhl said, "about a dog-tag."

A few hours later, Charles Grayner looked at himself in the long mirror in Dinkuhl's lounge. In place of his own features—pale, thin, with straight dark hair and, as he had always privately thought, an intellectual cast—he confronted someone with light auburn curly hair and fuller, high-colored cheeks.

Dinkuhl said complacently, "I believe in the satisfied customer. It's really quite an improvement. That fill-in on the cheeks will go six months if you don't wash it too violently. You can wash the hair. I know a tailor who will pad you out suitably. How do you feel?"

"I don't know. Comfortable."

"Voice," Dinkuhl said. "Voice and bad taste we can't do anything about. All right, let's go places—to Genetics, for instance."

A MANAGERIAL WORLD had no uniquely capital cities, but it had happened, by accident or design, that each managerial had developed a head, an organizing center, based on some particular locality. Thus you had Atomics at Philadelphia, United Chemicals at Graz in what had been Austria, Lignin Industries at Stockholm, Steel at Detroit.

But none of those cities was held in any way exclusively by the managerial which happened to have its central organization there. Here, at Detroit, the badges of Steel were predominant, but nearly all the other managerials were represented in varying degrees; some of them, like United Chemicals, with a major center and others, like Interplanetary and Genetics, with no more than a branch office.

The Genetics branch office was a four-storey building on the corner of Cadillac and 17th. In the Genetics tradition it was a good deal more luxuriously appointed. Dinkuhl and Grayner went through to the central shaft, and took one of the three air-spheres.

On the third floor they entered a private room. The legend stencilled on the door was *Official Awkright*. Burt Awkright proved to be a short sandy-haired man who had something of Dinkuhl's own temperamental appearance. He pressed a button and the door

closed behind them. Only then did he grin at Dinkuhl.

"How'd it go, Hiram?" he asked.

"Moderately. Very moderately. Burt, this is Charlie. Formerly he was Charlie Grayner. Now he's Charlie Macintosh."

Awkright nodded. He put a hand out and Charles took it. "Glad to know you, Official Macintosh," Awkright said.

Dinkuhl seated himself in an airfoam chair and motioned Charles to take another. He rested his elbows on Awkright's desk, and addressed him. "How's it with you? Who's in the lead now—Nature or Genetics Division?"

"Births in the Ganges and Oxus areas are down several percent on the previous year," Awkright said. "On the other hand, Bangkok and Sumatra are up about the same amount. You might say it's a knock-down ding-dong tie up to the present. As you know, though, this venerable organization doesn't give in without a struggle."

"What's the latest move?"

"Through from Edinburgh this morning. We are forming a series of mobile Birth-Reducing Units."

"You've been peddling contraceptives for years," Dinkuhl said. "What makes you think they're going to start buying now?"

"This time they don't have the option. Our brilliant scientists have developed an anti-fertility factor

that can be added to the local water supply. From what I've seen of the figures, there will be some deaths, but not above one or two percent, and the majority among the women."

Grayner could not help being disturbed by the realization that Awkright had just passed confidential information to two men from different managerials.

As if sensing the trend of his thoughts, Dinkuhl said, "Charlie's a rebel by force of circumstance—not by nature. Your disloyalty worries him."

Awkright shook his head. "I thought you'd brought a convert. What *did* you bring him for—if it comes to that?"

"For his GD card, in the first place. You can arrange for that?"

"I can." Awkright stared at Grayner, examining him with attention. "It might be useful to know what he's going underground for."

"Not to avoid a discipline," Dinkuhl said. "Charlie is still well regarded in these parts. Officially he's got six months leave on medical grounds, and his manager thinks he is going to the South Pacific. Here are his tickets." Dinkuhl tossed the little envelope over. "Can you get these used immediately? It would not surprise me if Manager Ledbetter found a way of cancelling them by tomorrow. It's not unknown for Psycho and Med to call cases

back for review, even within twenty-four hours."

"I'll do it today," Awkright said. "But I still don't know why he wants to get away, though."

"It's a private matter," Dinkuhl said. "He wants to find Sarah Cohn."

Awkright smiled. "So they didn't convince you," he said.

The web of conspiracy was becoming increasingly irritating, but Grayner successfully fought an impulse to rebel. After all, he had himself rejected not only the advice of his Manager but, in a sense, his membership of the managerial. He had resolved on the dangerously wilful course of making his own search for Sarah, and using a disguise. Certainly it was a stroke of fortune that he had so soon happened on a group who would be able to further his plans.

"Bring him along this evening, will you, Hiram?" Awkright said. "I'll have the card ready then."

Early that evening Grayner and Dinkuhl, in the latter's gyro, glided to rest before a typical Agriculture outpost—a cluster of squat white buildings looking like a row of beehives from the air. Detroit was twenty miles away, and the land here was flat and empty.

When the gyro touched down, Dinkuhl checked Charles' move to get out. The gyro rolled along, on the ground, towards the largest

of the buildings that faced them. As they reached it, the doors slid open and the gyro nudged its way inside.

Grayner emerged and looked around. Full lights were on and the main building looked like a gyrotaxi hangar. He counted a score of gyros before he gave up.

"Fair gathering tonight," Dinkuhl said.

"Am I to know what it is yet?"

"Follow me," Dinkuhl said. "All shall be made clear."

They went through another long shed packed with gyros, and from that, through a connecting corridor, to a third shed, more square in shape. The people who came in the gyros were here, sitting in rows of chairs, but also standing in overflow behind them. At the far end of the room a rough dais had been put up. Upon that low platform stood a man of medium height, forceful looking, but not particularly unusual except that he was bearded.

What surprised Charles most was that the badges of the different managerials were scattered indiscriminately among the audience. It was not a question of a bloc of Atomics here, a bloc of Mining there, and so on. The grouping was entirely mixed. Then he noted individual faces more carefully. On each face, almost without exception, there was a concentration, a passion, such

as he could never remember having seen anywhere before.

Grayner listened to the speaker.

"You must have trust in yourselves—the determination and will to believe. What comfort do I give you? No comfort but that of knowing, and being prepared. I tell you the sky will brighten and it will seem that day has come in the night. But I tell you also that that day will be more terrible than any night."

When the young man paused, Charles felt rather than heard the sigh of indrawn breath from his hearers. He began to speak more softly, his words carefully brought out and speciously reasonable.

"Why do you come here, my friends? Why do you leave the airfoam seats in the cinemas, the TV screen, the airsphering and the lascivious picnics? I will tell you! You come because you are in Hell! Now—at this instant—you are in Hell! The Pit is all about you. The time approaches! The hour must strike!"

Dinkuhl touched Grayner lightly on the shoulder. "Come with me," he said. "We must hurry."

"What in hell is all this?" Charles asked. "Perhaps it's best I'm in disguise here."

"Didn't you know about the Cometeers?" said Dinkuhl. "They aren't featured on TV, of course—not even on KF—but I thought the news had got around. The



big boys know about them, and think they're unimportant. And that suppressing them wouldn't help, anyway—in which they are certainly right. Meanwhile, they provide a useful cover."

Through a door Dinkuhl whistled open they passed into a small room. There were half a dozen people in it. Charles recognized Burt Awkright and Dinkuhl quickly introduced him to the rest. Grayner was confused and failed to take in their names, but he noted that one was from Atomics, one from Steel, and the others

from minor managerials—Psycho and Med and Interplanetary.

Awkright said, "You managed to get him here, I see. I was afraid you'd be too late. The alarm went out late this afternoon. We got our own man through on the Tonga stratoliner, but only just in time. Anyway, Grayner has the freedom he needs now."

"Thanks, Awkright," Charles said. He looked around the little group. "But I'd feel a lot more at ease if I had some idea of what your immediate plans are—concerning me, Dinkuhl."

A lean man with the Atomics badge—John Blain—was approaching them. He spoke in an English drawl. "Hiram should have introduced us collectively as well as one by one. This is the Society of Individualists, Charles, Headquarters Branch and General Assembly combined. We try to help desperately hard pressed men and women who believe as we do. And even some who don't. We don't amount to much, but we like to think we do."

Grayner shook his head. "I still don't get it . . . Well, I'll take it on trust for now. What do you want me to do?"

"It's your angle, Charlie, from which we are looking at things," Dinkuhl said. "You want Sarah Cohn. You have come to the conclusion—and it is our considered view that you are very possibly right—that she did not commit suicide or get herself killed by accident, but that she—and probably her father and Isaacsohn as well—were picked up by someone for some reason not unconnected with the kind of work that was being done at your laboratory. Well, who picked her up, and where is she now?"

Dinkuhl gestured around the small room. "We have a fair selection of different managerials represented here. We hear a lot of things, but we don't hear everything, and whoever is holding these people will be exercising a

certain amount of care in keeping the news from spreading. It might even be United Chemicals who had kidnapped their own people, though I can't think why they should—or why they should let Charlie here free even for a few hours if they had. In my view, the only thing to do is try picking up the trail where the last scent showed. That means going back to Berkeley."

Charles said, "I spent the night in Professor Cohn's suite. I went over it pretty thoroughly. So did Caston and Stenner. I doubt if anything will turn up there."

"There's more to Berkeley than Cohn's suite. There's his room at college. There's the chance that someone saw him in that crucial time immediately after he was last seen at the Interplanetary rocket pits."

Dinkuhl's face tightened. "Charlie will have two authorizations along with his GD card. One will be a routine authorization of furlough. The other, specially fixed for the trip to Berkeley, will be an arrangement to stay over as a visiting student working on idiopathic decalcification in certain Outer Mongolian tribes. It so happens that they have some stuff at Berkeley that isn't available elsewhere on this continent."

Blaine, the lean Atomics man, said, "Sounds all right. I can



think of about fifty things likely to go wrong."

"We'll hope they don't," Dinkuhl said. "All right, then. I'll run Charlie here back to Detroit and ship him on the stratoliner to Berkeley. See you boys at the next meeting."

They retraced their steps, the others following behind them. The room where the big meeting had been in progress was empty.

"Gone out to bay at the moon," Dinkuhl explained. "They always wind up that way. We'd better go join them for the last few minutes."

As they left Grayner heard the voice of the speaker intoning, "We are approaching the end of all things. What course shall we follow? Is our destruction not foretold?"

The words came back, a hideous echo. "Lord, we are damned! Send us your whips, your scorpions, your fires to cleanse us."

Grayner did not say anything until they were in the gyro and clear of the buildings. Dinkuhl started the engine, and Charles spoke above the soft rhythmic purr.

"That speaker seemed a little on the fanatic side. What would I have seen if I had stayed?"

"Cultivate your imagination," Dinkuhl said abstractedly. "One impossible thing before breakfast every morning."

"They seemed such an ordin-

ary set of people. It's incredible to think they could be capable of such violent emotional fanaticism."

The gyro lifted into the dim night sky, towards the scattered brilliance of the Milky Way.

"They were quite respectable tonight," Dinkuhl said. "You should see the Cometeers when they *really* go to town."

"But how can a normal person let go like that?"

"A normal person is reasonably well adjusted. I could make a good case for saying that that is precisely what that lot back there are: the well-adjusted human beings of the twenty-first century. Adjusted to a life that has lost its meaning—to a decadence, a stagnation. Adjusted to Managerial Society."

"As far as I know," Charles said, "I've never had the remotest inclination to behave like that."

The stars always appeared very close, night-flying in a gyro. Tonight, they seemed almost within plucking distance.

"But you wouldn't consider yourself a normal person, would you," Dinkuhl said. "Normal for your day and age? That's just what I've been telling you. Normality isn't an absolute. They're normal. I bet they're all ex-clients of *Cosy Bright* and *Red League*."

A thought struck Charles. "Are there more of them?"

"Hell, yes! That was only a

minor branch meeting of the Commuters. Plenty of other preachers, too—though that guy tonight was one of the best I've heard."

"Where did it start?"

"Different stories say different places. Some say New England, some France. According to one story, it began in India. It started before the comet came in view, but the comet's the main feature now."

"Then when the comet goes . . ."

"It will die out? Maybe. I don't think so, though. When something gets wound up the way this has got wound up, a little thing like a prophecy not coming off doesn't prevent it breaking loose."

They dropped at last towards the lights of Detroit, and to Dinkuhl's house by the edge of the lake.

"I'll shove this in its kennel," Dinkuhl said. "You know your way about the house by now. I'll be right up." He handed Charles the whistle-key.

Grayner walked towards the dark house. He reached the door, and whistled it open. Inside the lights went on automatically. He made his way up to the first floor. His nose itched. There was a whiff of some kind of perfume in the air; it was oddly familiar.

He knew what it was when his knees began to buckle. Astarate, the nerve gas! Charles slumped

to the floor with his head towards the threshold—and an instant later he saw Dinkuhl appear and stand on the other side of the door, looking into the room. He was wishing he could read Dinkuhl's expression when consciousness left him.

## VII

THE ROOM in which Grayner awoke—cell would be a more appropriate description—was windowless and approximately a cube, with sides of perhaps nine feet. There were two ventilation gratings facing each other in opposite walls. A centrally placed door was set in another wall.

Charles had a shattering headache; as he knew, an inevitable after-effect of astarate. In the wall facing the door was the ubiquitous TV screen. He looked in vain, however, for any control panel. He was feeling thirsty, but there was nothing to drink. The pain in his head was acute, but he made up his mind to disregard it. Wincing, he rose slowly to his feet and walked unsteadily across the floor.

He was halfway to the opposite wall when he heard the usual mounting purr, and looked up to see the TV screen coming to life. A middle-aged man sat at a desk bare of anything that might identify it. He was fat, red-faced, with a long thin nose and a remote sly look and he wore no managerial

badge. He spoke with a slight lisp.

"How are you, Official Grayner?" he said. "Is there anything you need?"

Charles looked at the man and answered slowly, "Yes. A glass of water, a pain-killer—and an explanation. In that order, please."

The man nodded. He called to someone out of camera range, "Water and neurasp for Official Grayner . . . Let me introduce myself. My name is Arnold Ellecott."

"Of . . . ?"

Ellecott smiled, dreamily, unpleasantly. "I would prefer it if you did not press that question—not right at the moment."

The door opened. Charles went across and took a flask of water and two neurasp pills from a tall silent man, again unidentifiable as to managerial. He swallowed the pills quickly. In a few minutes he could think more clearly now that the ache in his head was subsiding.

He turned and looked toward the screen at Ellecott. "Where's Hiram Dinkuhl?" he asked. "You kidnapped me from his house."

"I know of Hiram Dinkuhl, of course. But that doesn't mean I know his present whereabouts. The picking-up wasn't my affair. I don't know what's happened to Dinkuhl, but I'll try to find out. Like to have TV while you wait?"

"Thank you," Charles said casually. "*Red League* will do. Unless you can get me KF?"

"I believe," Ellecott said, "that KF is temporarily off transmission. *Red League* coming up."

It was likely that Ellecott was telling the truth about KF—the station was so much a one-man affair that Dinkuhl's absence for more than twelve hours would probably knock it out.

Charles watched the closing stages of a *Red League* melodrama apathetically. He was still in North America, anyway. Somewhere overhead the fixed space station, rotating precisely with the rotation of the earth, was beaming its message of placid security from eastern to western seaboard, from Hudson Bay to the Mexican deserts.

The play ended, and there was a newscast. The news, too, was as usual—a window opening on a reassuring world. United Chemicals announced a new branch on the Moon—the stark lunar mountains reached their craggy fingers against a black sky powdered with diamenté stars.

And after ten minutes more of the same clap-trap the screen clicked to emptiness, and then the emptiness gave way to Ellecott's face again.

"Good news for you, Official Grayner. We've got Hiram Dinkuhl. We can arrange for you to be quartered with him while we are fixing things up. We're putting you into rather more comfortable

quarters, too." Ellecott's lisp seemed more acute now.

Charles said warily, "That's very good of you."

"Two of our men are coming along to collect you now. I know you will co-operate."

It was while they were "collecting" him, escorting him through the door into a peculiar tunnel-shaped passage that Grayner realized what his surroundings were. The original cell, of course, should have put him on the track—the functional bareness. Now the convoluting corridor, the evidence of bulkhead construction, and, above all, the handrails for maneuvering in non-gravity conditions, made things quite unmistakable.

He was in a spaceship. A spaceship at rest, it was true, since gravity was the normal gravity, not the artificial variety, and there was nothing of the inevitable background vibration.

Grayner glanced at his two badgeless guardians with private satisfaction. So it was Interplanetary who had him. More encouraging still, they were fools enough to try concealing their identity while holding him on a spaceship. His new knowledge gave a definite fillip to his morale.

Charles recognized the room into which he was shown as one of the messrooms, converted hastily for his own and Dinkuhl's accommodation. The fine seams in

the walls were indicators of the presence of pop-out tables, and there was the hatch in one corner, through which food would normally arrive. The TV screens on facing walls were messroom style, too.

A certain amount of odd furniture had been brought in, including, he was surprised and pleased to see, a book-case. Dinkuhl was standing behind this with a book in his hand. He looked up with animation.

"Hello, Charles," he said. "So we meet again. And there's no need to let ourselves be branded entirely as fools. I can't think why they are so concerned at having no insignia on show, but it can hardly be more than a temporary measure of confusion. We could not be expected to be blind for very long. This must be a Type Seven freighter. But that's unimportant. Incidentally, they knocked me out with astarate, too."

"We're still in the pits," Charles said. "And I don't quite see the point. Interplanetary have offices and suites of their own. We could have easily been taken to one of those, where we should not have been able to draw the conclusion that the importance of my work was the key. Why stick us in a grounded spaceship, where our suspicions were bound to be aroused?"

"I can think of only one rea-

son," said Dinkuhl. "The spaceship is not to remain grounded. On my guess, preparations for blasting are going ahead at this very moment. And it's a fairly obvious move. You are valuable property. The best place to store you is where Interplanetary is by far the strongest managerial—in Luna City. Since the Earth-Moon traffic is their monopoly, they can be reasonably certain that you will remain there just as long as they want you to."

It was eminently reasonable, but a sobering thought all the same. The man on the UC Tycho Observatory station had painted a grim enough picture of life on the Moon, and he had not been a prisoner.

Dinkuhl interrupted his line of thought. "It is obvious that you are important and equally obvious that your importance doesn't lie in any one thing that you know. What does that leave us? Your mind and its skills. In fact, you're the blue-eyed boy—the only one who can crack the nut."

"An odd coincidence that there should have been three of us linked together—Isaacssohn and Sarah and myself," Charles said.

"Isaacssohn and Sarah," Dinkuhl said, "were Israelis. Now we come back to the question of your sixteen years in routine research at Saginaw. After P and M had made their blunder and routed you into D Squad at graduation—

what a lot we all know about you, Charlie!—the coincidence was that you should have been shoved, entirely by chance, into work on diamonds. And Isaacssohn was going to do big things with diamonds fifteen years later."

Dinkuhl glanced at him speculatively. "I wonder why you didn't do anything big yourself?"

Charles said, "My procedure was mapped out for me. As far as I can see, Isaacssohn was given a free hand. It's the only way you can hope to get anything valuable done."

"And, apart from Isaacssohn, do you know of anyone who has been given a free hand in research?"

"I only know Saginaw. There were no free hands there."

"There are no free hands anywhere, Charlie," Dinkuhl said. "But it wouldn't matter a nickel if they were free, because they would not do anything. Yes, you might have, but you were the exception—you were P and M's prize error. If your psychoplan had been properly prepared you wouldn't have been in research in the first place. You would have been fulfilling your rightful duties as an administrator along with George Ledbetter and the rest of the boys."

"I suppose so. You mean—"

"The managerial state is dead," Dinkuhl said. "And in a way, it was killed by its own merits. It

evolved a neat system for picking out its better brains and giving them the plum jobs. But it broke its neck on a minor anomaly—that the plum jobs, whatever form of society you base your ideas on, are going to be the administrative jobs, the jobs involving power of men over men.

"Science doesn't fit into that pretty scheme. It never has. At its best, under the later capitalism, it developed a hierarchy which meshed in with the real society around it. Scientists did their good work while they were young, and landed the plum jobs in later life. The man who was a brilliant physicist at thirty or thirty-five had retired from physics by the time he was fifty into a front-office job.

"All very satisfactory," Dinkuhl went on, "because you always had the younger generation to take the places left by promotion, to do the real work which kept science on the move. And they in their turn did their stint and passed on to a well-paid bureaucracy, made even more attractive by a knighthood or some other meaningless but eagerly grasped honor.

"But observe the managerial arrangements: a basic and largely disciplinary, largely conditioning training up to the point of graduation—followed by specialization. And that made the entire plan *too* efficient—because to the manage-

rial world it would seem pointless to train a man in the sciences unless he were going to spend the remainder of his life in those fields. And once he had been trained in a scientific discipline, then they made sure that he did that, and nothing else. You get it?"

"It might work, providing the rewards were assessed fairly," Charles said.

"And who," asked Dinkuhl, "assesses the rewards? The administrators. A reason why capitalism was so fruitful was that under capitalism the administrators did not form a cohesive governing body. Money-power sprouted from all kinds of odd corners. We've got the flow controlled today, and although the managerialials may differ among themselves, they all have the same set-up. The administrators naturally perpetuate their own supremacy.

"Their own children make Squad A, of course, even if their psychoplans show them to be on the verge of imbecilic. But the standard of intelligence handed on is naturally above average in any case, and being an assured ruling class they have smaller families than the rest. The rest of Squad A along with Squad B is made up of the high IQ's drawn from the population at large. Show anything above average intelligence and you're an adminis-

trator. Except, of course, when P and M slips up."

"We were always told that the psychoplane tested aptitudes," Charles said.

"They do that, too. But aptitudes are very conditional things. The man who would make a first-class scientist will also make a first-class administrator, granted the proper training. Don't under-rate the administrative genius. I wouldn't like to give you the impression that the present situation could be made good simply by reversing the top layers—making the bright boys scientists and development engineers, and the not-so-bright boys government officials. The situation thus produced would be very likely even more horrifying than the one around us."

"There's one thing," Charles said, "that bothers me. Why didn't the managerials do something about it?"

"Because it's a human reaction not to," Dinkuhl said. "Every single one of the crises that have convulsed the human race in the past have been evident in advance. The writing was there to read, but even when people were willing to read it, they treated it as unimportant."

"In this case, the *status quo* was particularly comfortable. Managerialism held a secure and untroubled world. Individual managerials may have had moments in

which they were distracted by tempting thoughts of world power, and the thought may even have been expressed at one or another Managers' Conference that a different selection policy at graduation might be the means of giving one managerial the boost that would enable it to swallow the others.

"But, apart from the fact that there are natural difficulties, the temptation was never worth the trouble. You can find something of the same divided loyalty in the stress period of late capitalism. There nationalism was the primary and official loyalty, and different sets of national rulers would contemplate going to war with each other, with equanimity and even with enthusiasm."

"But the more likely it became that the wars would have the incidental effects of bringing about major social changes, the more their enthusiasm dwindled. In the end they were being dragooned into wars from below, where the conditioning had been sounder."

Charles said, "And now they will have to do something about it—about science, anyway?"

"Now," Dinkuhl said, "they are doing only one thing—scrambling for the means of domination that's been tossed into the arena. What's the answer? One will get it, or more than one will get it. If the former, you have your centralized world control. If the lat-

ter, you either have a smaller, tighter hierarchy, or else a bloody struggle which one may win. Give managerialism credit for political astuteness. I think they will arrange it peaceably in the long run."

"And then?" asked Charles.

"Then the Managers will settle down to enjoy themselves again. The crisis will be over. Why should they make changes in so satisfactory a set-up?"

"Satisfactory!"

Dinkuhl glanced at him shrewdly. "You found it so."

Charles grinned ruefully, said, "Under conditioning."

"We're all conditioned—they, too. Nine-tenths of what they do is on the unconscious level. When a form of society has become moribund, only a fool would hope to revive it. The kindest thing to do is to stick a knife between its ribs. You may have to do it more than once to get through the excess fat, but every stab drains a little more blood. In the end, it dies—perhaps in some different way, but your contribution will have helped."

"And then?"

Dinkuhl shrugged. "Who knows? Another form of society, perhaps. The runs have been getting shorter. Slave economies for God knows how long. Feudalism about eight hundred years. Capitalism about four. And now not much more than a century sees

managerialism on the way out. I don't know what comes next."

"But why destroy, without having anything to offer?"

"Some things need destroying. We should put them out of their misery." Dinkuhl smiled. "That's why I like you, Charlie. You're the kind of time-bomb they can't stop happening. You and Isaacssohn and Sarah Cohn. For that matter, they will have to do something about Israel sooner or later. They have a nice little focus of infection there, now that the Israelis are beginning to find time for something else apart from food production. But it won't matter if they do. There will always be the odd one like you, anyway, and it's the odd one that grits up those nice smooth bearings."

"Grit in the bearings," said Charles. "I can think of more comfortable roles to have."

Dinkuhl looked round for a moment, and then bent down and stubbed his cigarette out against the TV screen control panel.

"Yes, you do have your personal situation to consider," he said. "Well, our Interplanetary friends, who have permitted me to get indignant at such length about the world at large, will presumably be coming through with a nice warm offer for you. You will understand that—could they be sure of knocking out Isaacssohn and Sarah Cohn as well—it might be more convenient for them simply



to eliminate you. Short-sighted, but then, they are all incorrigibly myopic. Well, they can't. At the moment, anyway."

Dinkuhl glanced thoughtfully in the direction of the TV screen on the nearer wall. "It would be more cheering, of course, if you could eliminate the possibility that the hierarchy will be formed *before* the weapon materializes. From their point of view—Interplanetary and whoever hold the remaining two—that might be a simpler solution. It must have occurred to them. In that case you would all become dispens—"

Dinkuhl broke off speaking. The TV screen was glowing into life. Dinkuhl chuckled. "I thought that might fetch them," he said.

Ellecott's expression, on the screen, was somewhat ruffled. He made an evident effort at self-control—the same thin smile on the same fat features.

"Dinkuhl has been talking a little sense and a lot of nonsense," he said. "I won't apologize for our eavesdropping. I am quite confident that you will appreciate how necessary it was. It is quite true that you are now in the hands of Interplanetary."

Ellecott flicked with one finger the small rocket-badge on his chest. "We left these off before, as a routine precaution until the possibilities of your being—recovered—had been entirely exclud-

ed. You are in a Type Seven freighter, as Dinkuhl observed."

"At which pits?" Charles asked.

Ellecott hesitated. "I imagine there can be no harm in telling you that, too. Toledo."

"Home, sweet home," Dinkuhl murmured. "Still in the poison belt."

"The points that Dinkuhl made," Ellecott went on, "were quite valid. We permitted Dinkuhl to tell you all this, because you are of very great importance, not only to us in Interplanetary, but to the whole world."

Charles looked at Ellecott squarely. "Where are Isaacssohn, and Sarah Cohn?" he asked.

"We don't know—yet. We have formed the impression that they are not in the same hands. We have a good Contact Section, and they are working on it. It will be a help when we have you safely at Luna City. We can then allow the rumor that we have you to get around. That may bring in something."

"I am not impressed by the prospect of Luna City," Charles said. "Is that essential?"

"Unfortunately. Luna City is our stronghold. We are the only managerial based outside the planet, and I put it to you as evidence of our fundamentally non-aggressive and responsible outlook that Interplanetary has never attempted to use the power given by that fact. We could withdraw

our relatively small bases on the planet and destroy every major city within twenty-four hours—from the space stations. It has never been considered.”

Dinkuhl murmured, “I wonder if the fact that the other managerials keep Interplanetary’s vital supplies on rather a hand-to-mouth basis could have anything to do with that?”

Ellecott ignored him. “Interplanetary was founded to carry man to the stars. We have long been perturbed by the trend of events, and we propose to use our influence to change them. But the immediate and urgent problem is the question of the diamond solar power-source. This can be used as a small portable but very powerful battery, as you know. It can also be used as a weapon, with some minor modifications.”

“Naturally that hadn’t escaped me,” Charles said.

Ellecott leaned forward towards the cameras, emphasizing the importance of what he was going to say.

“There are some managerials who would misuse such a power source and such a weapon. One of those may have either Isaacssohn or Sarah Cohn, or both. We need your help, Official Grayner, to enable us to match them weapon for weapon. But we hope it will not prove necessary. With your help, we can maintain peace. Without it, there is the prospect of

a confused and barbarous civil war, and perhaps, at last, of tyranny.”

“The offer,” Dinkuhl said impatiently. “Out with it, man. Let’s have the smell of money.”

“The continued safety of Dinkuhl is a minor part of it,” Ellecott said. “A man charged with acts subversive to the managerial may claim immunity by reference to his own managerial; an immunity which does not, of course, hold for you, Dinkuhl, who have no managerial. Normally there are good reasons for not invoking that clause, but it is different when matters can be arranged in private.”

Ellecott’s small deep-set eyes rested on Dinkuhl while he spoke; the thin smile twisted his lips upwards. Then his attention returned to Charles. “As for your future,” he said, “it is proposed to confirm you as a Director of this managerial, and a member of the Board. You will be given a free hand in your work, in the first place on Luna City, but before too long, we hope, under your own choice of conditions here on Earth. Once the present crisis has been got under control you will be in charge of scientific development—and it is inevitable that Interplanetary will have risen to a commanding position among managerials by that time.”

“Charlie boy,” Dinkuhl said, “it’s an offer in a thousand. Ev-

everything you want, and when it's all over you join the administrators. Will you put your kids into science? There's a lovely little problem for you!"

Ellecott said, "We are being very forbearing with Dinkuhl, but you will understand that there must be limits to this patience on our part. I think our offer is a fair one, and not unattractive. I hope you will agree to accept it."

"And if I don't?" said Grayner.

Ellecott smiled. "As an academic point, we'll consider that." Ellecott lifted his finger and looked at it. "But purely as a point of information, this ship blasts in three hours. And you will have the whole time of the journey to the Moon in which to think things over."

It was Ellecott's blandness as much as anything else which angered Grayner. Quite plainly Interplanetary was not going to budge from the path laid out. And Ellecott seemed certain that, in the end, Charles would accept.

"Never mind, I don't need time," Charles said. "The answer is *no*. I don't care about being forced into a membership."

Ellecott shook his head. "You were a wiser man when you weren't being dogmatic. I propose leaving you alone now. You will be under surveillance, either by me or one of my assistants. The door in the corner is not locked, and leads to the toilet room. The

microphones and cameras installed there will not be put into operation unless you are ill-advised enough to repair there together for private consultation. I think that's all. You will have food and drink sent along shortly. Anything else?"

Charles said, "There seems little point in my continuing to look like someone else. Can you arrange to get this disguise off me, and wash my hair back to normal?"

Ellecott laughed briefly, his voice rising approximately an octave when he did so. "That will be attended to," he said.

When Grayner got back from having his make-up removed, Dinkuhl was watching TV. He was about to switch the screen off when the transmission channel shifted and Ellecott's face appeared, looking distraught.

"It's necessary to make some changes," he said. "Blasting will take place sooner than we expected—almost immediately, in fact. Get into your hammocks," he said gravely.

Charles looked puzzled; he shook his head. "We don't know how to rig them," he said.

"I'll send someone down to—"

Grayner and Dinkuhl saw Ellecott's face transfixed—the open mouth, the eyes staring—for some moments before his head slid forward to his desk. The screen showed the top of his head, with

an incongruous bald spot in the center.

"Good God," Dinkuhl cried. "He seems to have passed out. What do you suppose—"

"Don't talk," Charles warned. "Take a deep breath. Keep on, slowly. With astarate, the quicker you go out the less hangover you'll have when you come to. I wonder who's got us now?"

## VIII

FROM BEING aware of the coolness of sheets and a background of muffled speech, Grayner awoke more fully to the sound of a familiar voice. How much later it was, he did not know. He listened quietly without opening his eyes, then placed the man's identity.

It was George Ledbetter. He was saying, "Yes, I think he's coming around now. Have you the neurasp ready, Nurse? Help me lift him up."

Raised into a sitting position, Grayner blinked in the bright glare of sunlight through plaspex walls. The nurse gave him the neurasp pills and he swallowed them with water. The pain began to ebb.

He looked up at Ledbetter and said, "What happened to me, and where did you come from?"

"Everything in time," Ledbetter answered. "There's Hiram Dinkuhl right beside you. He's not come out of it yet. I think there are

signs of activity now, though . . . Neurasp again, Nurse."

Dinkuhl looked about him. "I'm still wondering . . . George Ledbetter! Well, I'm damned!"

Ledbetter said, "I must apologize to both of you for putting you under astarate, especially since I understand it was the second time in twenty-four hours. There wasn't any alternative, though. We had to act quickly."

"They were getting ready to blast ahead of time," Charles said. "I take it that means they were aware a rescue party was on the way."

"But not how near we were to them," Ledbetter said. "Even the notorious Interplanetary efficiency doesn't always deliver the goods. We managed to get through, and break a few astarate capsules into the air intake. And just in time. If they were getting ready to blast they would have been going on to internal air control at any moment."

"What did you do with Ellecott and the rest of the boys?" asked Dinkuhl.

"We left them where they fell," said Ledbetter. "There's good reason why we don't want to make an open issue of all this. I don't think they will want to, either."

"Where are we now, anyway?" Grayner asked.

"Vermont. Place called Pasquin."

Grayner had been looking out-

side at the view. There was an ornamental garden, with a lake and what looked like a waterfall on the left. Beyond the garden's edge the ground fell away to a wide valley, bearing the marks of Agriculture's careful husbandry. In the distance there were gently rolling hills.

"What kind of an establishment is this?" Charles asked. "It does not have much of the UC stamp about it."

"It was a Director's mansion," said Ledbetter. "You will like the layout, I fancy. It's called The Cottage."

Grayner's relief at seeing Ledbetter and finding himself in the hands of his own managerial again left him so warmly grateful that for a moment he was at a loss for words.

Dinkuhl got up from his bed, and went across to the plaspex wall to get a clearer view of the grounds. He was wearing a night-smock, and Grayner realized that he had been fitted into one, too, while he was unconscious. He was glad now his make-up had been removed.

Ledbetter's face broke into a lean smile.

"I was wondering, a while back," Grayner said, "how Interplanetary managed to get onto my tracks. The same applies to UC. How did you manage to pick up the trail?"

"To begin with, that was a neat

business with the tickets, but Contact Section," said Ledbetter, "are not always so inefficient, you see. They were there all along."

Dinkuhl came over and sat on the edge of his bed, his knees spread under his night-smock. "Well," he remarked. "Have we got it on the deck now? Charlie is still the guest who mustn't leave? You wouldn't have a little lab fitted up for him out back?"

Ledbetter and Grayner both laughed.

"We have," Ledbetter said. "The stuff isn't here yet, but there's a good suite of rooms that can be used. The Director used to have a model layout of the old train systems in them. Very good light. We shall look after you, Charles."

It was the first time Ledbetter had used his given name. Grayner was not disposed to think much about that because he was still too amazed by the fact that Ledbetter was treating what he had thought to be Dinkuhl's joke seriously.

Charles said, "You mean that? I'm not to go back to San Miguel?"

Ledbetter made a gesture of negation.

"But the idea was that I should go back there," said Charles.

"Suppose we put it this way!" Ledbetter said. "This recent business has given us something of a shock. Naturally we were quick to realize that some managerial had

wanted Isaacssohn and Miss Cohn badly enough to go to dangerous lengths to get hold of them. As a result we were prepared to have to look after you carefully. But we now realize that we must be a lot more cautious even than we had planned. San Miguel is out. It would be like putting the honey back in the hollow tree when once the bears had found it.

"So instead of San Miguel there's Pasquin. We think we have covered our tracks this time. There'll be ample guard on, just in case we haven't. You'll be able to use the garden and grounds just as soon as our security plans are fully fixed. Tomorrow, I believe."

Dinkuhl looked up. "I take it I'm not out of line in assuming that everything you say to Charlie—anyway, on the negative side—applies to me equally."

Ledbetter nodded. "That's right."

"So," Dinkuhl said, "Charlie may be home with Momma, but it looks like I'm still prisoner. Different base, but still prisoner."

"It could be worse," Ledbetter said. Dinkuhl looked at him. "Could be Luna City. This is your tough luck, Dinkuhl. You just happened to have got mixed up with something big, and I'm afraid you'll have to sit in on it for the duration."

The "duration" proved to be

shorter than Charles could have dreamed.

It happened two days later—the bombshell revelation that was to change the face of his world.

It was Dinkuhl who exploded the bombshell—and it came at a time when Charles needed rest and relaxation desperately, needed to be at peace with himself. It came at a time when he could have rejoiced in the centrally heated cottage with its sub-tropical roof garden, and the belt of evergreens to the east and north from which the house was completely hidden.

The weather had turned sharply cold and they were outside walking when Dinkuhl turned abruptly to face Charles.

"Where would you say we were before Ledbetter and the boys launched their convincingly realistic rescue stunt?" Dinkuhl asked.

Whatever harebrained notion Dinkuhl had got hold of, the sensible way of treating it, Charles recognized, was to meet his points logically and sensibly.

"In one of Interplanetary's spaceships," he said. "Freighter, Type Seven, by your reckoning—in the Toledo pits."

Dinkuhl looked at him. "Quite some Contact Section, as Ledbetter said, entering the Toledo pits when Interplanetary had their most treasured possession stowed away. But that wasn't what roused my suspicions. I knew when I

first met you in that phoney mess-room that we should keep quiet about everything that mattered. That freighter was wrong in minor things. They had pop-out tables, but they'd missed the pop-up ashtrays. And the corridors hadn't taken the battering they get from use in free fall—the track was all worn on the floor. Something else, too. I'll come to that.

"Anyway, the thing to do was to string them along, whoever they might be, and wait for something else to happen. In due course, it did. United Chemicals to the rescue."

"It strikes me as crazy," Charles said. "I hope you don't mind my saying that. Why should UC—or whoever you think it is masquerading as UC—do something as complicated as that? And what about the offer Interplanetary made me? I might have accepted it—what then?"

"That puzzled me a little," Dinkuhl admitted. "I wondered how they would fake the take-off, and the space flight, and the lunar conditions. Very tricky. But there was no real need for them to do so. Had you taken the offer, there was nothing to stop them changing their minds and keeping you on an Earth base. It's easy enough to think of adequate reasons."

"You were never meant to take the offer, of course. It was put simply to soften you up psychologically, to make you properly

grateful for being rescued. Even if you had accepted, the rescue might still have taken place, for much the same reason.

"As for the complications, the people who pulled this job have you summed up as loyal to your managerial, and unlikely to be genuinely at ease under terms of constraint to any other. At the same time, you had shown signs of initiative and some rebelliousness, so if they put on the UC cloak at the beginning and clapped you in custody for your own good, you might very well be awkward about it. Their solution was good. Have you captured by—as you thought—Interplanetary, and then rescued by—as it seemed—United Chemicals. Up goes loyalty and gratitude. Down goes rebelliousness."

Thinking he saw a flaw, Charles said, "The fake spaceship may show that it wasn't Interplanetary, but it doesn't mean it was not UC . . ." He broke off.

"It does, though, doesn't it?" Dinkuhl said. "When I woke up and saw George Ledbetter, I wondered. When I heard him talk about rescuing us from Interplanetary, I knew the play was still going on. If it had been a genuine business, he would have mentioned the name of the real villains."

"But what if the whole scheme you've outlined was planned by UC—for the reasons you gave,

which would apply almost as well in that case as in the other?"

"Yours," Dinkuhl said, "was a simple-minded managerial, as managerials go. But in any case, I happen to know we are now being run by UC despite Ledbetter appearing. I'll come back to that. You didn't feel quite easy in your own mind, when you first woke up in The Cottage, did you?"

"It didn't amount to much," Charles said. "As I recall, it was you who put me at ease again."

Dinkuhl smiled, "The safest man is the man who thinks he can see through things—so I let them see I thought I could see through things; little things. I pretended I was honestly puzzled and at a loss. They had me taped."

There was a moment's silence. Then Grayner said, "All right. They are not UC. Who are they?"

Dinkuhl flicked the stub of his crushed-out cigarette up into the gloomy branches of a thicket. "Who," he asked, "would be likely to fake the interior of a spaceship? That was the big question. If not Interplanetary—who?"

"Go on," said Grayner. "It doesn't mean anything to me."

"It did to me. Something else confirmed it—a certain kind of track, marking the surface both in the corridors and the mess-room. I knew what caused that track. TV camera cables. It was a prop Telecom had built for shooting spaceship interiors for the

space opera serials. I made my final check on my deduction after we landed here.

"I told Ledbetter I wanted to send a message through to a friend on KF—concerning some technical advice. Ledbetter said I could, without hesitating. He would have hesitated all right if he had been UC—because UC don't have anyone who knows enough about TV operational jargon to be sure I wasn't passing a dangerous message outside. Telecom do."

"Telecom," Charles said. "Well, I'm damned."

Dinkuhl grinned. "We both are. You'll soon see. It would take Telecom to have the kind of spy equipment this house has, too, incidentally."

Anger was beginning to replace confusion in Charles' mind. He said tightly to Dinkuhl, "What are we going to do?"

Dinkuhl looked at him. "You're the H-bomb. The way I see it, you can do one of three things. You can go back and get on with the job for your new employers. I take it that's out?" Charles nodded grimly. "Or you can go back and refuse to get on with the job. I don't advise that. Ledbetter has plenty on the ball, and he's playing for big stakes, remember."

The confusion returned. Charles said, "Ledbetter was UC. How



does he come to be working for Telecom? I just don't get it."

"*Sancta simplicitas*," Dinkuhl commented. "You wouldn't get it. I know a little about George Ledbetter. He had a tough start—a background that would have been damn bad even in previous centuries. Both parents drunkards and fighting. He was a bright kid. He fought his way up to the top. But the top goes right up to the sky for that kind of climber. And managerial loyalty is only skin-deep, if that. No, George isn't the kind of playmate I recommend for you."

"The third thing. What was that?"

Dinkuhl eyes him steadily. "Escape."

Charles looked around. Through the trees the barrier fence was visible, rising to perhaps ten feet. He could see the gate clearly, and the upright figure of the guard inside his plaspex bubble. Dinkuhl went on talking, in a slow drawl that might be concealing nervousness. But it was impossible for Charles to be sure.

"I've had enough time thinking about this. It should go okay. I thought maybe it would be rushing things to try it this morning, but my principle is that it's always safer to act at once. If not now, we would have had to leave it till tomorrow afternoon. That's when our friend is on guard again. Listen carefully now. This is how we'll work it."

## IX

AS GRAYNER and Dinkuhl approached the sentry-box, Charles could see the tall immobile figure through the plaspex. He looked a very ordinary character, in UC uniform, with the UC badges. His eyes were fixed coldly on them as they approached.

"Another thing," Dinkuhl said. "When I saw this man the first time he was wearing a Telecom badge."

Dinkuhl tapped on the plaspex. The guard unseamed his sentry-box and came out towards them. He had his Klaberg at the ready and was wearing the nose filter against astarate—presumably the Klaberg was fitted with an astarate release.

He said, his voice midway between deference and challenge, "Anything I can do for you?"

Dinkuhl looked at him for a moment. When he spoke it was with the full resonance of voice that he could muster up when he wanted to. "Brother, are you damned?" he said.

The guard only looked surprised for a moment. When he spoke it was in a liturgical tone of voice matching Dinkuhl's own. "Damned beyond all hope of rescue—in this world. Brethren, are ye likewise damned?"

"Damned to Hell," cried Dinkuhl. He jerked his head towards Grayner. "In this brother's mind

the Lord has planted power and a sword. He must be free to serve the Lord whose Finger lights the sky to destruction."

The guard inclined his head. "To the Damned all gates are open."

Dinkuhl looked at the gate; a little wistfully, Grayner thought. It was a temptation simply to get out and trust to luck after that.

But Dinkuhl said slowly, "We need a gyro, brother. Your relief will be along inside five minutes. I wouldn't fit in your uniform, but this brother will. I want you to let him take it. We will tie you up. It is the Will of the Lord, brother."

The guard nodded. Without hesitation he stripped his equipment and his outer garments from him. In the sentry-box there was the usual plastic exudator. Dinkuhl adjusted the nozzle to quarter inch orifice, and at a touch the plastic rope ribboned out. Carefully and deftly he tied it around the unresisting guard.

As Grayner put the uniform and accoutrements on, he looked at the obliging guard. Dinkuhl finally propped the guard in one corner of his box. He pointed towards the distant house. A gyro was lifting from the roof.

"Here it comes," Dinkuhl said. "I'm staying out of sight. Watch it, now."

Grayner stood just outside the box, waiting for the gyro. It ar-

rowed down through the wintry air, its rotors flapping idly, and perched on the road perhaps ten yards away from him. The left hand door slid open, and a uniformed figure jumped down. It was a relief to observe that the guard's superior was only of middle height.

The man walked up to Grayner, and drawing near, said in surprise, "You're not Herriot."

Charles made an attempt at disguising his voice. He had drawn his hood close around his face and was not seriously worried about his features being recognized.

"Herriot was taken sick," he said. "Didn't they tell you?"

As the man advanced Charles drew his Klaberg and landed it at the base of his neck. He rolled over and lay still.

Dinkuhl emerged from the sentry-box. "Charlie," he remarked, "you're a man of action. I could not have done any better myself."

Dinkuhl knelt down. "Fetch me a hank of rope," he said. "No, don't look so concerned. He'll live to explain to George Ledbetter what a sucker he's been. Should make it less tough for Brother in there. For a fanatic of that stamp the only safety is in numbers. It pays to be a member of The Cometeers."

When he had been adequately roped, the guard was pushed into the box with his companion. Dinkuhl led the way to the gyro. He

clambered up through the open door and Charles followed him. Dinkuhl took the controls.

"Time," he observed, "is on anyone's side but ours. This is where we move."

The gyro climbed steeply, and headed north.

The rolling countryside of Vermont was spread two thousand feet beneath them. The clouds were low and from time to time wisps of them obscured the view. It was very peaceful.

They flew westwards, hoping to find a southerly intersection. It was soon clear to them, however, that they had lost their orientation. But after a while they found it again, and by noon were circling down above Montpelier's large airport.

Their landing was not challenged. Telecom had evidently not dared take the risk of sending out a widely broadcast alert. They left the Telecon gyro behind, and took a gyro-taxi all the way to Detroit. They paid it off in the central taxi-park, and then, from a call-booth, Dinkuhl got in touch with Burt Awkright of Genetics Division.

Over Dinkuhl's shoulder, Charles saw the interior of the office to which he had been taken by Dinkuhl as the first step in his private commitment.

Awkright's broad freckled face came into focus as Dinkuhl adjusted the controls. "Hiram," Awk-



right said, "so they let you loose?"

"Listen carefully," Dinkuhl said. "Can you pick us up—Fourth and Eisenhower? We don't want to stay on public view any longer than we have to."

"Be right around." Awkright grinned. "Someone's been looking for you. For Charlie, anyway."

"He's a popular guy, no kidding," said Dinkuhl. "Come right over before some more of his friends turn up."

Twenty minutes later, Awkright appeared in Dinkuhl's ramshackle auto. Dinkuhl and Grayner climbed in, and Charles said, "I can't imagine a better way of travelling incognito."

Burt Awkright laughed. "I borrowed the car while you were away, Hiram. I hope you don't mind. Frankly, I'm bewildered by all this. You mean someone's still after you? I thought you were with UC."

"The trouble with having good contacts," Dinkuhl remarked, "is that you get to rely on them. And then someone else starts shooting the old moola along the pipeline. That was Telecom we just got away from. Where are you heading—not my place. They're likely to be dropping in again with false beards and astarate phials."

"We're going to my place," Awkright said. "You see—Charlie already has a visitor."

Charles said, "You mean there's

someone already out there, waiting to see me? Anything but that."

"That's apparently what he means," Dinkuhl said. He turned to Awkright. "I hope it's someone you know and trust. The situation's likely to be difficult. They desperately want what Charlie's got, and there's always a tendency to grab instead of asking politely."

The auto drew up before a big apartment block fronting the lake. It looked out of place beside the rows of large limousines in the parking space. The three men took an elevator to the top floor. Before the door of his apartment Awkright turned to Grayner.

"I warned the visitor we were coming," he said.

The door opened and they went through into the foyer. The floor was plaspex bricks over a tank of tropical fish—presumably Awkright's hobby, since it was too expensive to be an incidental fitting in that kind of a suite.

"You go ahead, Charlie," Awkright said. "Straight through to the right. I want to show Hiram something."

Grayner nodded, his eyes still troubled, his lips set in tight lines: He pushed the door open and walked ahead to a big bright airy room with a lake view. Someone was standing by the main window, looking out over the lake. She turned as she heard Charles come in. It was Sarah Cohn.

Grayner went right over to her.

Sarah smiled, at first a little hesitantly and then with warmth. He took her by the elbows, eager to feel the realness, the solidity, of her body. It might have been some trick of projection cameras.

But it wasn't, and her breath caught as he touched her. He wanted to bring her closer, to take her altogether into his arms. He was fairly sure she would not refuse him this time. But something prevented him. He simply took one of her hands between his own, and held it firmly, caressing it with his fingertips.

"Sarah," he could only manage to say. "What happened? The gyro—" He broke off, the right words just wouldn't come.

She shivered. "That was the unpleasant part. A pre-set lock was put on the gyro controls. About five minutes after I took off I found the controls just didn't respond. I had to sit there while the gyro took me—"

"Where, Sarah? Where were you taken?"

"To Sacramento," she barely whispered.

"Saramento. Atomics!"

"Yes, Charles—Atomics. But I didn't know that until the gyro came down right alongside one of their pylons. I just didn't know what was happening. I was taken into the Atomics HQ building. They were very nice and most apologetic. They had had to pick me up, they said, for questioning

on managerial importance. I was to have a bed there for the night, and leave for Philadelphia the next morning. I was relieved enough that my worst fears had not been realized."

"You couldn't get any message out, of course?"

"No—but they assured me that I would be free again in three days. During that time, Daddy—" a tormented look came into her eyes—"Daddy's death wasn't their fault. They asked me whether I thought my brief disappearance would be likely to have any serious effect on him. They were willing to pick him up too—if I preferred it that way. It was my error of judgment. I didn't want my father to have the shock of being placed under constraint of any kind. I guess I underestimated the shock to him of learning that I had disappeared."

"What happened," Charles said, "when you got to Philadelphia?"

"I saw Raven."

Charles whistled, remembering that Raven was Chief Director of Atomics, Chairman of the Council of Managerials. "And . . . ?" he started to question her.

"I liked him. In fact I think he's the first person I've met over here that I've genuinely respected." Sarah released her hand. "I've got more to tell you," she said, leading him over to a wallset.

When they were seated, she said, "Naturally, you're suspicious,

distrustful—and angry because of what happened to me. I was angry too—at the beginning. Remember, I was never sold on the values of managerialism to start with. Anyway, I'm not going to argue with you about it. I want you to see Raven yourself."

"He did want something, though?" said Grayner. "Can you tell me what it was?"

Sarah fixed her eyes on him. "He wanted me to transfer from UC to Atomics. Officially, and above board. I can tell you that he would like you to do the same."

Grayner stared back at her in utter amazement. He said, "You don't mean—you consented? That you actually applied for transfer?"

From a pocket she took the Atomics flame badge, and pinned it on her tunic. Her face softened. "Charles," she said, "I should have liked to have seen you and talked it over with you first, but they told me you'd been captured by Telecom. They were trying to get you released. Meanwhile what was there to do?"

"Go back to UC," he said. "Why not?"

"UC is so ineffective as to be impossible," she said. "When Hans disappeared, the Atomics Contact Section were onto it. They tried to get cooperation from UC—from the top, from Graz. But they didn't even know what had been happening in their own laboratories, and didn't care either."

"They didn't know," Charlie said, "because Ledbetter had been routing the important stuff through to Telecom."

Her hands tightened on his wrist. "You'll at least see Raven, won't you?" she asked. "You'll talk to him. You'll try to understand why I feel as I do."

For a moment Grayner remained silent, his lips tight, almost on the point of refusing. Then gradually, his resistance melted away.

## X

THE GRAVE AIR of formality, to some extent characteristic of all Atomics posts, was paramount at the Philadelphia HQ. They deviated from the norm also in having the Chief Director's office on the roof; brass, in other managerialials, took the first floor. There was a private elevator giving directly onto the Chief Director's suite, but the more usual route, and the one by which Sarah took him, was through the roof-garden. A bowery walk, dripping with honeysuckle, gave on to a small courtyard, with three fountains, surrounded on three sides by walls plasticized to the effect of cool whitewashed simplicity.

The Chief Director's private office was directly facing the walk; it was a long room, with one window on the courtyard and the other on Philadelphia, spread out

thirty floors beneath. The desk the Chief Director was using was the one by the courtyard window. The uniformed precise flunkies ushered them in, and Raven stood up. He bowed slightly, and smiled.

"I had the pleasure of seeing you approach, from my window. Miss Cohn," he said. "I am very glad you were successful in your mission. And you, too, Mr. Grayner—it was very good of you to be willing to put some of your time at my disposal."

Atomics for some reason retained the archaic forms of address in polite conversation. Charles was not certain whether it was etiquette to extend the usage to Raven himself, though. In any case, there was no reason why he should fall in with Atomics customs.

"Naturally, Chief Director," he said, "it's an honor to be invited to meet you."

Raven directed his attention to Sarah. "Do take a seat, Miss Cohn. And you, Mr. Grayner."

Sarah remained standing. She said, "I think it would be better, sir, if I left the room for the present." She glanced sideways at Charles. "Mr. Grayner knows of my transfer, and knows something of my views on it. I don't think it would help at all for me to stay."

"As you feel best," Raven said. He nodded to the two flunkies by the door, and they opened it again

to let Sarah out. "You will be within call?"

She nodded. "In the garden." She smiled at Charles, and left.

"I think an entirely private conversation would be most satisfactory, don't you, Mr. Grayner?" Raven said. "Rogers, Barczywski—wait outside, please."

The doors closed, and they were alone in a long and carefully ordered room. It had been built, and furnished, a long time ago; this was one of the first major edifices of the managerial world. Grayner noticed that an old-fashioned projection TV had been installed. There was the small slit in the ceiling which would release the hanging screen.

"You will have a chair, please, Mr. Grayner," Raven said. "Cigar, cigarette?"

Grayner took the chair indicated, and a cigarette from the box. "Thank you, Chief Director," he said. He drew on his cigarette and waited; while he waited, he studied the man.

Raven was a little under average height, and slimly built. His features were somewhat sharp in outline but entirely relaxed in expression; it was impossible to imagine him getting excited over anything. All his appearance combined to be impressive, but the impressiveness, it seemed to Charles, was much more than the sum of the individual features. The man radiated confidence, and

integrity. Charles thought of Ledbetter—Ledbetter friendly, frank and assured, but with so much else battened down behind that front, battened down and fighting to be free. He could feel sorry for Ledbetter's vaulting ambition, which yet had to meet this reality, at the top.

"Well, now we can get to the business," Raven said. "I hope you will let me indulge my age, Mr. Gayner, in running over a number of things with which you must be familiar—in some cases, only too familiar. But I want to put things in their perspective. You are, I am sure, a shrewd and eminently sensible young man, but with the experiences you have so recently had, it would be surprising if your judgment had not been knocked a little out of place. Could you, I wonder, give me some idea of your present views?"

"On what?"

"On fundamentals. On society." Raven glanced down into the viewer on his desk. "Your record is a good one. It shows genuine stability when loyalty traits persist so strongly in someone who, quite frankly, has had less than a square deal from society. For an integral part of our society is the right of the able man to use his ability." He paused.

Charles said warily, "That's something I have found confusing—the implications of what you have just said."

Raven looked at his cigar. "I believe I am safe in claiming that no previous society can show so good a record as ours in encouraging intelligence, in whatever circumstances it shows itself. The odd mistake, as in your case, merely sets off the records."

"No. It wasn't quite that I was referring to. I simply meant . . . It's rather hard to explain." Raven looked at him benevolently, encouragingly. "Until the recent events you mentioned, I took things for granted," Charles went on. "I think that what has probably surprised and shocked me more than anything else has been the realization of the mistrust and hostility that exists between managerialials."

"The world seems to have broken up, and it isn't easy to put the pieces together again. Dinkuhl's group of malcontents—you seem to know about them—and the Cometeers—and you probably know about them, too—and then finding that Telecom had access to all my records—through Ledbetter, I suppose. Now you have my records as well. The whole set-up seems to be riddled with double-crossing."

Raven nodded. "Not a very pretty picture, is it? The managerial society, with all its running sores on show. The spectacle of a society chasing its tail, right hand fighting left hand, for the possession of the skills of three peo-



ple—two of whom are not even its own children—is one to strike fear. I suppose Mr. Dinkuhl would describe such a situation as the ultimate throes of decadence."

Charles smiled slightly. "He does."

"And I," said Raven, "must take a large measure of the blame, I suppose. I have been Chief Director of this managerial for fifteen years, and Chairman of the Council for twelve." He leaned forward slightly. "Ten years ago, to the month, I reminded the Council of the urgency of reorganizing the research and technical development sides of managerial life. It was not a new proposition—several of my predecessors had drawn attention to the same need. The matter was ventilated—and dropped. Nothing got done."

Raven gently tapped cigar ash into his disposal cup.

"Then Dinkuhl was right," Charles said. "This society is too far gone to save itself. I, too, have even found myself wondering if this isn't so."

"Sometimes," Raven said, "I have thought that, also. But, you know, there never has been a historical situation which was final. Rome fell, but Byzantium, as closely pressed, gathered its defences and survived for another eight hundred years. It is the law of averages that destroys empires,

and that is a law that doesn't help you at all in assessing the particular. No, in any historical situation, the best one can do is to assess probabilities—and after you have assessed probabilities you have still got to decide about taking sides."

Raven looked steadily at Charles. "A crisis is ahead of us. But you must remember that a crisis is precisely what it says it is—a moment of decision. For a decadent society, it is the periods of non-crisis that are dangerous. The crisis presents the challenge and a response must be made to it."

"Just how is it going to help managerialism," Charles said. "And my working on the diamond-solar power source for Atomics?"

Raven hesitated slightly. "You force me into the embarrassment of asking you to make an estimate of me, personally. From what you have recently encountered yourself, and from what you have probably gleaned from Mr. Dinkuhl, would you regard me as typical of the Directors of managerialism?"

Charles said promptly, "No. Of course not. The reverse."

Raven laid small, neatly manicured hands in front of him on the desk. "Either you help to destroy managerialism, or help to save it. You will be saving, as I have explained, something very imper-

fect, but destruction is a terrible thing. Were other things equal, I should counsel you to work on behalf of your own managerial. But I don't think other things are equal." He paused, then said in a low, serious tone, "I ask you to throw in your lot with us, because it is my own belief that we are most capable of helping you and of using your work wisely."

"You already have Sarah," Charles said. "If I should ask for transfer as well—aren't UC going to object to this wholesale suborning of their research workers?"

Raven nodded. "It is very likely. But one of the few inter-managerial regulations the Council did agree on was that entailing the full and free right of transfer, with the consent of the person seeking transfer and the new managerial."

"I'd like to ask one question," said Charles. "You haven't got Isaacssohn?"

"No," said Raven. "We have had some lines to work on. Frankly, we know very little yet. He may even be genuinely dead."

"You know that he is the real brain behind the diamond power source—that the original work was all his?"

"We know that," said Raven. "Now let me ask you a question, Mr. Grayner. What stage would you say the work has reached?"

"Development stage. When I first examined it, I wanted to pass

it on for routine development—the essential creative work had been completed. Sarah persuaded me to carry on for a time. Of course, I did not know then that there was no one capable of doing the development work."

"And how long, in your view, should the development work take?"

Charles shrugged. "It's practically impossible to give an answer—snags always crop up. Not less than three months, I should say. And probably not more than a year." He glanced at Raven. "Once again, it's worth remembering that even if you hold two out of three, it's the third that's the heavyweight."

"I'm not so sure. Einstein did the early mass-energy conversion research, but his work on applied nuclear fission was confined to a recommendation of its feasibility. Isaacssohn may or may not be able to work faster than you and Sarah, whoever he is working for. I doubt if he will be able to work much faster."

"Probably not," Charles said. "The snags stage tends to level things out."

"And our chief concern is to prevent whoever is using Isaacssohn from having the monopoly on the completed invention. For that purpose any fairly close finish will do."

"Yes," Charles said. "I see that."

He looked around, at the dignified solidity of his surroundings. Suddenly he didn't want to leave them. Raven would let him go if he wanted to—but where should he go? And how would he remain free from Ledbetter and the others? And was he prepared to lose Sarah, so recently found again? Working here seemed absolutely right for him.

"I'll transfer," he said. "I'll work for you, Mr. Raven."

"I'm glad," Raven said. "I'm very glad, Mr. Grayner. But you can still have time to think it over, if you have any reservations at all."

"No. No reservations. You don't mind my continuing to see Din-kuhl?"

"See whom you like," Raven said. "You will be seeing a lot of Miss Cohn, since you are to work together. I did not wish to influence you by stressing that aspect, but I imagine it has its interest for you."

"I noticed it—that you weren't stressing that."

"Well, perhaps you would care to go along and tell Miss Cohn the news now; she said she would be in the garden, did she not? Eventually—there's no hurry—I should like you to go and see Mr. Tehchen, and fix up this transfer application. Mr. Tehchen looks after that side of things for us. Tenth floor—room B ninety-seven.

You will be directed by one of the pages."

Charles got up. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Grayner. I shall be dropping in on you at the lab, so it won't be long before we meet again."

Obviously, Raven hadn't wasted time. For, Mr. Tehchen—Manager Tehchen—was a man of expedition, and the transfer was filed with the Secretariat of the Council that afternoon. The following morning, Charles was given the option of starting work, and he was glad enough to take it. He had residual guilt feelings about UC; he had expected to have them, and the pangs were not so bad as he had guessed they might be. Nevertheless they existed, and work seemed the most obvious way of eliminating them—work in Sarah's company.

IT WAS LIKE a wonderful dream, working again with Sarah Cohn. But he found it a bit difficult at first. It had been inevitable, as he saw, that the course of his acquaintance with her—knowing her for so short a time and then separated suddenly and left to brood about her under very abnormal circumstances—should have produced an uncertainty when he found her again. She was different was his first reaction. He found a softness in her which was disconcertingly unfamiliar.

The explanation dawned on him unexpectedly. He had left out half of the equation; accounting for the effect of shock on his own attitude he had not remembered that Sarah's shock had been a worse one. It would naturally produce changes in her—perhaps far-reaching ones. Adrift from all her moorings, both the links with that world of her childhood snapped, it was only reasonable that she should look for someone who might give her reassurance. He could count it as his good fortune that it happened to be him.

They worked late that night and started early the next morning. And the first few days together went by on swift wings. One morning the plasbestos they were using for heat insulation turned out to be badly flawed. Normally it would take two to three days to replace it. But here things were different and it was promised them within six hours.

"Six hours," said Sarah. "Why, we could take a break."

Charles nodded. There were a number of minor jobs which they could get on with, but he didn't have much enthusiasm for them.

"What do you suggest?"

"It's a long time since I went airsphering," she said. "There's a good wind. It ought to be fun. Go change. I'll wait here for you."

Grayner smiled and walked away quickly.

The airsphere hangar was reached through the roof-garden. Above and beyond the summer through which they walked, the sky was grey and angry, and tossed with scudding clouds. Sarah Cohn selected a double airsphere.

They pulled the sphere clear of the hangar, and climbed in. There were two seats, each with controls but the controls had automatic cut-offs which prevented both being used together. The seats were adjustable from ninety degrees to a hundred and eighty.

Charles took the right-hand seat and controls. He decompressed and there was the slight hiss of air being driven out and helium taking its place. The sphere rose gently through the quiet air trapped in the roof-garden. Then it emerged, above the conditioning range, above the plane of sunlets, and the wind struck it like a giant's bat, lifting and swinging it away into the outfield. The blustering sky was suddenly all round them; the shock of the transition was a thrill in itself.

"Cut off," Sarah said. "We are quite cut off from everything."

They had jumped to a thousand feet in a few seconds, and were still rising. The Atomics building had fallen away behind them; with the plaspex giving them vision all round—above and below and to all the corners of the horizon—they could see with

sharp clarity just how isolated they were.

"See the sun?" Charles asked. "The real sun?"

"Love to."

They were in the clouds, a sea of mist pressing about them, now lighter, now darker. Like a bubble bursting through depths of water, the sphere burst free.

Charles slipped his own coat off, and tossed it to the back of the airsphere; it lay beside Sarah's discarded garment. There was a significance about that, which he was not sure if he wanted to think about. He was wearing the sleeveless shirt and shorts he had changed to for off duty in conditioned atmospheres.

Charles looked down at Sarah. Her eyes half closed, she was looking at him quizzically. She showed to her best advantage: the bronze of her skin against the deep crimson of the airfoam, and the faintly blued white of the far-away background.

"I think I might relax, too," he said.

She smiled, but made no reply. He pushed his own chair back, and turned to face her. The smile still lingered.

"I wondered . . ."

Her lips barely parted. "Yes?"

"A scientific question."

"If I can help you . . ."

"The well-known Israeli inhibitions," Charles said. "I wondered if they functioned with the

same precision at all altitudes."

The smile deepened. "I should think, a very interesting question. What would be the scientific approach to it?"

"Experimental."

He moved towards her. Her willingness was certain even before she opened her arms to him.

## XI

THINGS RAN smoothly for a while. Raven himself dropped in at the laboratory now and then. He showed a good deal of friendliness and an intelligent interest. Charles found him standing beside him one day while he was completing the polishing of a stone. He heard Raven's voice above the nervous grinding whine of the scaife.

"I'm interested in seeing you grind your own stones, Mr. Grayner. Though, I must say, not surprised." Charles straightened up. "That one will be almost completed?"

Charles picked up the stone, set in its metal-plastic mount. He flicked the switch, and the scaife spun gradually to a halt. "That one is finished," he said.

"Mind if I have a look?"

Charles handed him the mount. Raven picked up a loupe from the bench and gave the diamond quite a professional going-over.

Putting it down at last, he said, "Brilliant cut. Brown-brilliant?"

Charles nodded. He was surprised but cautious. "I didn't know you had worked in this line."

"Not worked." Raven smiled. "I've got what used to be known in earlier ages as a butterfly mind. Tell me, Mr. Grayner, why is it that later excellent diamond cuts, like the brilliant, disappeared, although the earlier cuts, like the rose, managed to survive?"

"I wish I knew. I've often wondered."

"It was simple enough. Luckert's synthetic—borbide. It was one of the last technological developments before the interregnum. In the war and post-war period diamonds jumped in value, as always, for economic security holding. Luckert's borbide fooled enough people to put a premium on diamonds cut in the old style. They presumed those at least would be genuine."

Charles said, "But there's no great difficulty in telling borbide from diamond—it discolors, and there's the piezoelectric test."

"It discolors—within a year or two—but that didn't help the purchaser at the time, did it? As for the piezoelectricity check, you have to remember that diamonds were sold by small shops. The special equipment required wasn't available in any case during the breakdown period. It was simpler to concentrate on primitive cut stones."

"I should think the borbide

people would have got onto that," said Charles.

"They did. But the brilliant cut didn't come back. That, Mr. Grayner, is how aspects of craft, and even crafts in their entirety, pass out of the world's cognizance." Raven walked about the small room. "Mr. Grayner, are you finding it pleasant working here?"

"Very pleasant," said Charles.

"You would have fared better materially with Telecom, perhaps. Are there any complaints, Mr. Grayner?"

Charles hesitated very briefly. "I have everything I want."

"You and Miss Cohn are getting on all right together?"

He said, with no hesitation this time, "Very well."

"That's good. I hope you won't hesitate to come to me if there should be anything."

OUTSIDE THE laboratory, his life with Sarah proceeded very harmoniously. They went most places together. All of love was a new experience for him, and he was determined it should not be spoiled in any way.

They spent a lot of time air-sphering—mostly together, but occasionally each in a single bubble. Then there would be the delight of chasing each other over the invisible hills and valleys of the air. Along the rivers of the wind they would pursue each other, and they were rivers capable of turn-

ing, without warning into precipitous waterfalls that plunged the spheres hundreds of feet, either up or down, in an instance. Close on her heels, Charles might suddenly find himself looking down on Sarah, far below, or gazing up, blinded by the sun, to where her sphere drifted high and remote.

And, of course, there was the delight of bringing the spheres in to some sun-splashed ledge of rock, on the world's roof, of tethering them to the mountain face with impact suckers, of eating and drinking in that warm silent isolation, of sitting and talking or simply sun-bathing. Of making love.

One morning when Charles had sent Sarah to check some priority supplies, Dinkuhl was announced outside. Grayner was delighted when Hiram Dinkuhl walked in on him.

"Hi, Charlie," cried Dinkuhl.

"Where's your pass, Mister?" Grayner said with facetious sternness.

Dinkuhl managed a wry smile, but he clearly wasn't amused. "Where's Sarah?" he asked.

"Checking supplies. She'll be back soon."

Dinkuhl leaned back against one of the benches. He had a restless look and his voice had taken on the slightly affected drawl that indicated some inner excitement.

"That the set-up now?" he asked. "You do the work and she

checks supplies in? I thought her middle name was Einstein."

"Wait a minute," Charles said angrily. "What the hell do you mean by that, Hiram?"

"Brother, you're worried," Dinkuhl said softly. "You're plenty worried. Tell Uncle Hiram."

Charles stared at him. "For God's sake! Have you gone crazy? Who's worried?"

"What is it, Charlie?" Dinkuhl asked. "She doesn't grasp things that should be simple going? You wonder even if maybe she had a knock on the head during that fortnight you were apart?"

Grayner restrained his voice to quietness. "I don't know what's got into you. Anyway, I want you to keep it for somewhere else, Hiram." He turned away. "You'll be welcome in a different mood."

"I'll carry the invitation in my heart," Dinkuhl said. "Here the lady is now. . . . Hi, Sarah. Been copying any good sketches lately?"

Grayner had no idea what Dinkuhl was talking about, but the tone was unmistakably offensive. He expected Sarah to flare up or treat him with icy contempt. She did neither.

"Glad to see you, Hiram," she said placatingly.

Dinkuhl watched her for a moment. Then he smiled. "What we all need is a drink," he said. "You both have a drink?"

Charles hesitated. Sarah said, "Be glad to."

Dinkuhl brought a flask out of his pocket. It had two small plas-tobeakers attached. He filled them, and looked about inquiringly.

"A glass for Uncle Hiram! Can you find me one, Sarah?"

While Sarah was getting it, Dinkuhl picked up the two already filled. He gave one to Charles. The other he held in his hand, holding it with his palm cupped above it. When Sarah came back, he gave it to her, and took the glass she brought and poured out a tot for himself.

"You know something?" he said. "Charlie here has been telling me he's disappointed in you. He thinks you're lying down on the job."

Grayner stepped across to stand in front of Dinkuhl. "I don't know what's got into you, Hiram," he said tightly. "But, for the last time, lay off."

"You know, I never met Sarah Cohn at San Miguel," Dinkuhl said. "But I know enough about her to think she wouldn't have needed your help in a slanging match, Charlie." Turning to Sarah, he said, "Well, honey?"

"I feel dizzy," she said uncertainly.

Dinkuhl took her gently around the shoulders. "Come and lie down, honey." He got her onto the couch. She shook her head,

as though trying to shake off cobwebs.

"You're going to sleep, honey," Dinkuhl said.

His voice was significant, and as though in response she jerked up. "You mean . . . ? There was something in that drink!"

"Just what have you been doing?" Charles demanded.

"What's your name, honey?" Dinkuhl said gently. "Before you go to sleep, what's your name?"

Her speech was becoming slurred. Unable to sustain the effort she had made, she sank back again. "Sarah Cohn. You know . . ."

She tried to speak again, but it was beyond her. For a brief moment she looked at them in agony and fear, and then her eyes closed, and she was unconscious.

Charles had rushed over to her, and he sat beside her now, holding her limp hand. He turned to look up at Dinkuhl.

"Something good, Hiram," he said. "It had better be something good. He turned and stared at the girl's figure.

"That isn't Sarah, Charlie," Dinkuhl said in a low serious voice. "It never was Sarah Cohn."

Grayner shook his head. "I know her. It's Sarah. Her voice alone . . ."

Dinkuhl bent over the girl. He pulled the neck of her tunic down a fraction, and pointed. There was a line on the skin, barely



visible—a line perhaps an inch long.

"Gannery's operation. Reformation of the vocal chords. You can get precision with it and I guess this job was a precision job."

"How did you know that would be there?" Charles was so shocked he could hardly talk.

"It had to be," said Dinkuhl. "I knew she was a phoney. You remember the time she'd been showing that blueprint-thing on the wall screen? You took her off to show her the diamond polishing bench. I had a look in her little room while you were away. She had been copying that sketch from a photostat of the original that Sarah did. Why should she need to copy, unless it was because she wasn't Sarah at all? They had primed her well, but you can't prime a person with years of scientific experience."

Charles stared at the motionless girl. "I can't believe it. That little scar . . . it could be something else."

Dinkuhl stood beside him. "You remember being Charlie Macintosh, Charlie? Macintosh was a real guy—works at an obscure GD station in South Africa. Would have been a laugh if you'd met up with him. Awkright went to some trouble to pick him: he had to be someone who matched you closely, but with extra flesh at all points. You can build up; you can't whittle down. He had

full cheeks, while you have thin ones."

Dinkuhl paused, gazing at the face of the girl who had been Sarah. "An interesting face," he said. "Good looking, but not precisely beautiful. The temples bulging a little just above the brow line. Unusual, that."

From his pocket, Dinkuhl took a small knife. He flipped the catch and the sapphire blade leapt out, gleaming dully. Charles watched in fascination as he bent down towards the unconscious face. He heard himself saying, "Stop . . . !"

With a deft motion, Dinkuhl sliced the girl's flesh at the base of the forehead.

He held up a strip of flesh that he had cut away. There was no bleeding from the incision. The cut had laid bare not flesh but plastic. Now, beyond any doubt, Charles knew he had been loving a mask. Dinkuhl tossed the strip into a disposer; he walked away from the girl, and leaned against a bench on the opposite side of the room. He looked at Charles.

"Well, Charlie boy? What's it going to be?"

Charles said dully, "You tell me. How do you expect I should know?"

"People are always entitled to be told the truth. No, I'm not riding you, Charlie. I'm not the strictly monogamous type, but I can guess how bad it is. You

would have had to find out sooner or later. They still operate on the assumption that scientists are dumb."

Charles shook himself. He saw the truth of Dinkuhl's statements, but that still didn't make it easy to act on them. To find that he had been deceived in this way was somehow worse than when he had thought Sarah killed. He looked up at Dinkuhl, almost in inquiry.

"What about Raven?"

"Just a fine old Southern gentleman. Ledbetter was no more than peanuts. Raven's good. All these tricky arrangements made on the assumption that they were going to get you away from Telecom. We only made it easier for him by arranging the break ourselves. Raven's the kingpin, all right. You've reached the managerial top, Charlie. You can't go higher."

Dinkuhl raised his head slightly. There was the sound of a door sliding open in the lobby.

It was Raven himself. He stopped just inside the door, his flashing dark eyes taking in the tableau—Dinkuhl leaning against the bench, Charles still sitting on the couch beside the girl's recumbent body.

"Good morning, Mr. Grayner," Raven said. "And Mr. Dinkuhl." He peered towards the girl. "The lady would appear to be indisposed."

Dinkuhl watched in tight-lipped silence as Raven walked across to the couch, and bent down to examine the girl. Raven straightened up again a moment later, and looked at them both.

"Would you gentlemen object if I were to arrange for Miss Levine to be taken away and put properly to bed? I doubt if she is likely to recover her faculties for some hours yet."

Charles did not say anything. Dinkuhl nodded. "Go right ahead," he said. "It's your home territory."

Raven went across to the call screen. They heard him asking for two stretcher-men. Then he switched off and turned his attention back to them.

"This has been rather unfortunate," he said. "I had hoped it would be delayed for some time—a few more weeks, at any rate."

"Life," Dinkuhl said gravely, "is like that. I hope you will arrange to convey our regrets to Miss Levine when she wakes up. She will understand it was nothing personal."

Raven said, "And you, Mr. Grayner? Your regrets as well?"

The implication was obvious, and Charles resented it. But he was prevented from saying anything immediately by the arrival of the stretcher-men.

"To her rooms, please," Raven said. "And then get a nurse for her."

Grayner felt Raven watching him while the little procession left the room. He said, as the door closed behind them, "A lot of regrets, Director. But they are all concerned with being made a fool of. Assistant Levine was doing her duty, I guess."

"If we must use titles," Raven said softly, "we should use the right ones. Manager Levine. An exceptionally brilliant and talented young lady, and we are very proud of her."

"With the views I now hold of Atomics," Charles said bitterly, "that fails to surprise me."

"Your views are understandable. They would be understandable even if you had not had the benefit of Mr. Dinkuhl's tutelage. But I hope they will not be permanent. You are an intelligent man, Mr. Grayner. Mr. Dinkuhl is also of high intelligence, but his intellect is hampered by his emotions; particularly by that over-riding urge to destruction."

Charles said, "But tell me, where is Sarah Cohn? Who has her?"

"I do not know. We have looked very hard and we have not found her—neither her nor Isaacssohn. You can imagine that we have spared no efforts. They may be dead. It is a conclusion to which the absence of any information is tending to force us, Mr. Grayner."

"Or could you be trying to per-

suade Charlie that he might as well make do with a near-miss?" Dinkuhl said. "Another dab of plastic, and Miss Levine's as good as new."

"You misjudged me," Raven said. "I was being frank. You are putting things in their worst aspect though I will admit to hoping that Mr. Grayner may overcome his present resentment against Miss Levine. But that was not in my mind at that time." He glanced at Charles.

"Miss Levine took this duty on with great reluctance. She accepted the task only on my personal plea, and because she was the one person available who could be made to resemble Miss Cohn physically, and at the same time be capable of deceiving you for a time on points of personality and technical skill. No one else could have done it anywhere near as well."

"She made one big error," Charles commented. "And one easy enough to avoid. Sarah is essentially chaste. Didn't her psychoplan show that?"

Raven nodded. "So is Miss Levine," he said.

"Then the orders she was given were at fault."

"There were no orders," Raven said. "I think I take your meaning, Mr. Grayner. Whatever may have happened between you was not a part of the attempt to deceive you. You will give me cred-

it, I hope, for not committing so egregious a blunder."

"Then?"

"Miss Levine was surprised—and not pleased, Mr. Grayner—to find her duty in some respects more attractive than she had anticipated. She quickly became fond of you. She told me so, Mr. Grayner. It was necessary, to explain her request to be relieved of her duty."

"She asked that?"

"Three times. The latest occasion was yesterday evening. I was forced to refuse. I told her I hoped that within a week or two you would have settled well enough in this managerial to know the truth. I did not reckon with Mr. Dinkuhl, who appears to have a talent for unveiling indiscreet secrets."

Incredulously, Charles asked, "You think, under those circumstances, I would have stayed?"

Raven said, "Mr. Dinkuhl, that is a flask I see in your pocket? Might we not all have a drink—unadulterated this time?"

Dinkuhl grinned. He poured into the two plastobeakers and the glass. Raven took the drink, drank, and smacked his lips lightly. "A good liquor, Mr. Dinkuhl."

He turned to Grayner. "I take it you will not reconsider simply for the sake of helping me save my skin, Mr. Grayner?" Charles' face was expressionless. "I

thought not. What do you plan to do now, by the way?"

"Leave us to our worries," Dinkuhl said. "You have your own."

"Very true, gentlemen. Good-bye, Mr. Grayner. I wish I could say I believed you to be in good hands. Goodbye, Mr. Dinkuhl."

Walking jauntily but without haste, Raven went out.

There was no hurry this time. Grayner and Dinkuhl went to Oak Ridge for drinks and a meal. Charles contemplated his gin and vermouth. He had much to think about.

"Hiram," he said, "the last few weeks I have spent chasing my tail. I don't entirely blame you for this, though I do have the impression that you've provided a twist once or twice when I showed signs of slowing down."

"Telecom came and took you. You put yourself into Atomics. I only got you out of those two havens."

"I want to find Sarah," Charles said, "if she's alive."

"Well, we've tried the overworld. I never thought we'd get anything there. Now we try the underworld."

"The underworld—why?" asked Grayner.

Dinkuhl's face changed, hardened. His voice dropped an octave. "Brother, are you damned?" he demanded. He resumed his normal expression. "After a life-

time preaching culture, I guess I can preach damnation."

"What do you expect to get from the fanatics who call themselves the Cometeers?"

"I don't know," Dinkuhl said. "Nothing. Anything. At least—it's where Contact Sections are least likely to look for us. With a couple of natural beards, we'll be impenetrable. Put not your trust in plastics when nature can lend a hand. I'll do the preaching, Charlie. You can go around with the hat."

"You think you can get by?" Charles asked doubtfully.

"I've made a study of it," said Dinkuhl.

"It seems crazy."

"When sanity calcifies, madness is the only solution," said Dinkuhl. "Any better ideas?"

Charles shook his head.

## XII

THE NIGHT WAS very cold and dark with clouds. Inside in the square box-like room, even the heat generated by the massed ranks of the Cometeers failed to raise the temperature perceptibly.

Grayner wrapped his cloak more tightly about him. Dinkuhl above him on the rostrum, had thrown his cloak wide, presumably warmed by his own eloquence. While waiting for their beards to grow sufficiently they had taken on artificial ones—tapering in

Grayner's case, square cut in Dinkuhl's. There was some discomfort in the wearing of them. But coupled with the preacher's long cloak they provided an impressive spectacle. In Dinkuhl's case particularly.

Dinkuhl was talking now, and his words rang out with conviction. "Are there some who shall say that love walks in the world? Are there some who shall say that out of Evil will come Goodness? My friends, is there Life in Death? Let them hear, who have ears."

He paused. "My friends." His voice carried, Grayner knew, to the very last row. "Are you Saved?" His voice rose in volume, with the diapason of an organ. "Or are you Damned?"

An inarticulate groan responded to it. With horror, Grayner thought, and wondered if he could have guessed right: that Ledbetter, even Raven, might have other reasons for indulging in unawareness or indifference. That it might be fear that held them back, fear of unleashing the storm of the Cometeers.

Charles had helped Dinkuhl find his way up on to the rostrum. He stood beneath it himself, shivering. There was no point in attempting impassivity; he could see no more than a vague blur of white which was presumably the faces of the damned. They would not be able to see him at all, even

if there was any likelihood of their looking at him.

The wind clung close, prying and biting. Dinkuhl, however, made the pause that the ritual demanded. His voice leapt out suddenly, shouting, savage.

"Down! Kneel! You dogs, you bitches! Down, down, down! Down to your damnation! Down on your knees, and cry, cry out we are damned! Send us your whips, your scorpions, your fires to sear out tenderest flesh!"

And suddenly it was over. The sixty minutes seemed sixty seconds to Charles. Dinkuhl climbed down from his dais, and Grayner and he stood together by the door of the shed while some of the people made their personal goodbyes. The atmosphere now was entirely different: friendly and casual. It was now that they picked up information—the Cometeer to get in touch with at the next port-of-call—news of other preachers in the district. Their other questions did not seem unusual in the general asking and answering.

"Brother," Dinkuhl said, "we are looking for two instruments of the Lord. They hold power in their hands. A young woman whose name is Sarah Cohn, a man whose name is Hans Isaacssohn. Wherever they are, they are being kept secret. They may be captive. Have you heard anything of these two? The Will of the Lord, brother."

A short barrel-figured man with an Atomics badge cried out, "I don't know of anyone under those names, Preacher."

"They are scientists."

"No. I don't know any scientists."

The same question, substituting only Sister for Brother, was addressed to a dark intense Hydroponics woman.

"I have never seen them, Preacher. Tell me, Preacher! My Manager . . . Now and again he has the look of the damned. Should I put it to him—ask him to one of the meetings?"

"Sister, every man is entitled to know whether or not he is damned. Yes—ask him."

A cynical-looking middle-aged man in Steel, said, "I know enough about my Manager to prosecute him before the Throne, Preacher. But I have never seen the two you seek."

The last scatter of the faithful departed to their gyros, leaving Grayner and Dinkuhl together again.

THEY MOVED in leaps of a hundred or a hundred and fifty miles, and at random. There was no control of the movements of the Preachers. It was their duty to travel as the spirit moved them, and they were welcome everywhere. Grayner and Dinkuhl traveled in a vast circular swath—east to Ohio, south to Kentucky

and North Carolina, north again along the Atlantic seaboard. At Norfolk, they arrived the day after another Preacher, but the congregation was still numerous and enthusiastic.

Dinkuhl commented, "What happens if we coincide with one of these guys?"

"No flattery, Hiram," Charles said, "you'll take the kudos. Brother Lucas was telling me yesterday that he'd listened to upwards of fifty Preachers, and none of them came within acres of you."

It was at Boston that they finally coincided with their most important Preacher. They had been told to get in touch with a man called Brogden, of Psycho and Medicine. He was the Manager at the crematorium.

Brogden turned out to be a huge man, almost a giant, with a sullen appearance punctuated by flashes of nervous merriment. His white overall, which he wore very long, had the look of a shroud, but an oddly incongruous shroud.

He said, "I got word you were coming, Preacher. It's the way it is. We haven't had a Preacher for three weeks, and now we get two on one night."

"Maybe we should go on to our next preaching place, brother," Dinkuhl said.

Brogden shook his head. "No call for that. We've heard about you—that you're a fine preacher of the Wrath. Preacher Robinson

and you will preach together. We've got a big hall, and the Word's strong in Boston. You'll have a bite with me before we go down, Preacher? You too, brother?"

They nodded their agreement, and Brogden led them through the long corridors of the crematorium to the suite of rooms he had at the back. He paused once, and reversed the polarization in one of the side-panels with the flick of a switch. They looked through transparency to a room studded with raised platforms, each bearing its corpse awaiting cremation.

"An impressive sight, Preacher. I always think," said Brogden. "The bodies for the flames, and the souls already in the flames."

Apart from one evening on Mining property, Dinkuhl had preached previously in sheds, outside the towns, belonging to Agriculture. Brogden led them, by gyro, down to the waterfront, to a stretch that was apparently unused now though still nominally under the control of Telecom. The gyros already parked showed that Brogden had been right in his prognosis of a good attendance.

They met Preacher Robinson inside, and made their salutations. Preacher Robinson was a gaunt man and there was something odd about his speech.

"I've heard you're a fine teller of the Wrath, Preacher," he said. "Would you like to lead off?"

Dinkuhl replied, "Better if you lead off, Preacher. You've been preaching longer than I have."

"As you like."

Robinson preached well, with a cold bitter fervor. But Dinkuhl, following him, was in tremendous form. The audience was roused to a pitch of sobbing and shouting by Dinkuhl's playing on their emotions. Dinkuhl passed them back to Robinson for the liturgy that took place in the open.

When it was over, Grayner and Dinkuhl stood beside Preacher Robinson and made their informal goodbyes to the faithful. They had decided that in the presence of Robinson they would not put their usual questions about Sarah and Isaacssohn.

Charles stood in silence while the two Preachers listened to the small talk and small problems of the departing congregation. The comet was plainly visible at the top of the black chasm between two warehouses. A few yards away there was the slow lap of water against rotting piles.

Brogden said, "Will you all come back with me for the night? There's plenty of room in my suite for the three of you."

It was Preacher Robinson who answered first. He said, "The Preacher and I will have some things to talk over in private. We may come up to your place afterwards, brother, but you should go along now."

"I'm in no hurry, Preacher." Brogden laughed, but his laughter had a hollow sound in the night air. "Nothing waiting for me but Hell."

"Go along," Preacher Robinson said.

There was enough light for Charles to see Dinkuhl stiffen slightly. It might be the usual thing for Preachers to compare notes when they happened to meet, though it was something new to them. Charles comforted himself with the thought that they were two to one. But there was still a handful of the congregation left when Preacher Robinson started to talk.

"How long have you been telling the Wrath, Preacher?" he asked Dinkuhl.

"Not long, Preacher. The call only came to me recently."

"You tell it well."

"An instrument of the Lord, Preacher."

Dinkuhl's voice, Charles noted, had relapsed into the drawl that signified alertness.

"Tell me, Preacher," Robinson asked, "these other two you have been asking questions about—a woman called Cohn, a man called Isaacssohn. Are they instruments of the Lord, too?"

It might still be no more than a routine check-up; the fact that they knew of the questions they had been asking did not necessarily signify anything more than



that the Cometeers were a tighter-knit organization than had seemed likely on the surface.

Dinkuhl said, "Every man and every woman is an instrument of the Lord."

Preacher Johnson laughed, and his laughter was the dropping of a cloak. It was the laughter of cynicism. They had reached an inner circle; that was clear enough. And it was an inner circle dedicated to something other than the fanaticism of the Cometeers. But to what? The general inference was clear enough. Some managerial. But which? Which managerial was capable of controlling an organization like this—an organization of which Ledbetter and even Raven were unmistakably afraid?

"You put that well, Manager Dinkuhl," said Preacher Robinson. "We're still curious, all the same. What do you want Cohn and Isaacsohn for?"

Instead of answering him, Dinkuhl said, "Mind if I have a word with Charlie—on our own?"

"A word. Don't make it longer than half a minute."

Dinkuhl drew Grayner to one side. "He's a managerial spy," he whispered. "But blunt instruments are all they've got. They would have produced something else if they had it. Probably don't carry anything metal in case someone puts the detectors on them. Can you swim?"

Charles nodded.

"We'll try a rush," Dinkuhl said. "There's only one couple between us and the water. Right over them and in. Swim left. There's a main artery within a hundred yards, and they can't get at us before then because of the warehouses. They won't try anything under lights."

Charles said, "Okay. When do we go?"

"We'll walk back to them and I'll take out a cigarette pack and a lighter. When I toss the lighter in the Preacher's face, we move."

The watchers appeared to relax as Charles and Dinkuhl walked back together to Robinson. Dinkuhl drew his pack of cigarettes out, slowly. He felt in his pockets for the lighter.

Robinson said, "Are you prepared to be reasonable? We play ball if you do."

Dinkuhl brought out his lighter, and pressed the flame button. The small blue glow shot up to its full height of three inches.

"A lot depends," Dinkuhl observed, "on the brand of ball you play. For instance . . ."

He roared, "Now!" as he flicked the lighter in Robinson's face.

Grayner leapt for the man standing immediately between himself and the waterfront, and shoved him to the ground. But he brought Charles down with him. Charles rolled clear, but by the time he had got to his feet another Cometeer had him by

the arm and yet another was between him and the water.

Dinkuhl had got clear. He stood by the water's edge, and looked back. They were making no attempt to go after him. *Me again*, Charles thought.

He called, "Beat it, Hiram!"

As he tore his arm free and dived for the man in his path, Charles saw Dinkuhl bull-rushing back to his assistance. He did not see anything else. Something hit him on the back of the head.

Grayner returned to consciousness to the sound of a high-pitched buzzing roar, recognizable as the noise of a stratoliner's engines. He sat up, and had time to see that he was in the hold of a cargo-plane, and tied up. Dinkuhl, also bound, lay a little way off.

A voice said, "No trouble. We don't want trouble."

Another blackjack blow smashed him back into oblivion.

### XIII

THE NEXT TIME Grayner awoke, he was free of his bonds. He sat up carefully, and then got swaying to his feet. His head ached, but no more than after his experience with astarate. Probably the bludgeoning effect of a blackjack was no worse than that of a drug.

He was in a small neat cell of a room. There was an amorglass window in one of the walls, and

outside, light filtered through diffusely. His first concern was for Hiram Dinkuhl.

Dinkuhl was lying on the floor with a nasty blue and black bruise on his left temple. Grayner tried to rouse him, but without success. There was no water in the room, and slapping his cheeks brought no result.

Leaving him for a moment, Grayner went to the window and looked out. The building they were in was on a height, and it looked out over a city that pricked his memory without quite yielding to it. A mixture of styles, but predominantly very old, and with more than a hint of the oriental. A museum city.

That narrowed the possibilities quite a bit, for there were few cities that had escaped both the War's destructions and the subsequent pattern of standardization in civic reconstruction marking the beginning of managerialism. Grayner tried to place this city, but was unable to do so.

It wasn't until the door of the room opened, and he saw the impressive looking man who stood in the threshold—and heard him dismiss someone with him—that Grayner guessed where he was. He couldn't believe his eyes. A number of things fell into place then, not the least of which was the trace of an unfamiliar accent which he had detected in Preacher Robinson's speech. Grayner had

never seen the new arrival in the flesh, but he had had a previous deep-view of him, and in the same attire.

It was, he was almost positive, Hans Isaacssohn, and the attire was the Israeli military uniform.

The stately man extended his hand, and looked at Grayner affably, and with great interest. "You're awake now. What a pity our eventual meeting, and bringing you and Mr. Dinkuhl here, couldn't have been simpler—and easier on both of you." He smiled. "Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, Charles Grayner. I'm . . ."

"Hans Isaacssohn, I know. I'd have recognized you anywhere." The look of amazement and wonder at being with the Israeli scientist was pronounced on Grayner's face. Then he turned and pointed toward Dinkuhl.

"He's been roughed up badly," Charled said, feeling his own head.

Isaacssohn looked sympathetic. He had a slow smile that warmed his normally severe features. "The need for secrecy precluded the use of more advanced methods of repression," he said. "I'm afraid that some of our men may have been a little heavy handed."

Isaacssohn pressed a wall button. "You have not been here long. They dropped you here, and then informed me. I came almost at once. You must have been re-

gaining consciousness when they left you."

"Yes. But this city? This is . . ." Grayner gestured towards the window.

"The capital of the world!" Isaacssohn smiled again. "Jerusalem. You are in the Einstein Institute. Seventh floor, room ninety-three. Tell me, how are things in California?"

"California," said Grayner. "It's a few weeks since I was there."

Two orderlies, also in uniform, brought a stretcher in. Isaacssohn told them, "This man should have been taken to sick-bay. See that he's looked after."

As they lifted Dinkuhl and placed him on the stretcher, Grayner said urgently, "Sarah—she's all right?"

Isaacssohn nodded.

"And her father?" Grayner asked.

The remark seemed to amuse Isaacssohn. "Yes. Professor Cohn is in good health and spirits. Very good spirits. He wants to see you. We'll go along now, if you're ready."

Isaacssohn's office was two floors below. When they entered, Isaacssohn gestured Grayner toward a chair, and clicked on a phone-viewer.

"Get me Gathenya," he said, and then glanced up at Grayner. "We use wire more than you do for communications. A result of being closely knit and centralized.

There's a saving on power, and we have had to learn ways of economy."

The screen lit up to show a man sitting at a desk. He apparently recognized Isaacssohn, and saluted him.

Isaacssohn spoke to him, and the man nodded. The screen blanked, and opened up again to show a factory interior. It was a mass-production layout, but not automated. There seemed to be a surprising number of workers—far too many in fact. Isaacssohn said something else, and the cameras switched to a close view of the end of the line. The products were being picked off the line and carefully stacked for transfer. They were small, metal, and egg-shaped.

"Recognize them?" Isaacssohn asked.

Grayner shook his head. "Should I?" he asked.

Isaacssohn gave another instruction. This time the scene cut to a courtyard, enclosed but open to the sky. It was filled with a swarm of objects resembling monstrous bees. Men flying.

These, too, wore Israeli military uniforms. Each was encased in a skeletal framework of metal. The framework had a footrest, a seat, and a waistband with certain controls. From the waistband the metal rose in a hoop above the flyer's head. At the top of the hoop were the vanes; horizontal

for take-off and inclinable in various directions for routine flying and maneuver.

As the scene became more clearly visualized in Charles' mind, he understood that quite a complicated aerial parade was taking place. One flyer, hovering motionless at one end of the courtyard, was obviously an instructor. The rest appeared to be obeying his commands.

"A very neat design," Charles commented at last. "Powered by . . . ?"

"As you will have guessed, by the diamond-solar battery. Those were the batteries you have just seen coming off the assembly line."

"Congratulations." Charles' voice was full of emotion. "But I don't know how you did it, in the time available to you. I saw at least six months' work in the development stage, quite apart from the time required for production—tooling up, and so on."

Isaacssohn smiled. "Of course. That's why I can't accept the congratulations. We have had people working here on it right from the beginning. My job at San Miguel was a stalling one for the past year. And it was not so easy as you might think."

Grayner looked at him skeptically. "But how could you have people working on the solar battery in Israel, when you and the Cohns were refugees? And know-

ing your plans here, why did you give any information at all to United Chemicals? You revealed enough to interest more than one managerial."

"So I understand. But you're forgetting that this is a capitalist country—not a managerial one. It's disorganized, ramshackle, inefficient. So inefficient that it was not at all difficult to carry out research work unknown to the government of the time. Professor Cohn was Director of this Institute before our misfortune. The President was badly misinformed and the man he appointed in succession was one of our group. It was quite easy to camouflage the work.

"Also, the idea was in a very embryonic stage indeed when we left Israel. I needed a laboratory and funds very urgently. I had to wave some kind of carrot under the noses of those donkeys at Graz. And I had to continue to give them enough to persuade them to maintain the project—though I understand a good deal of what I did send was being intercepted by Ledbetter for another managerial?"

Grayner nodded. Isaacssohn went on, "And I was fairly confident that there wasn't one of them with the training and brains to make anything of the information anyway. From what Sarah told me about you, I discovered that I had made a mistake there.

Our men tried to locate you, but various other groups got on to you first. I should be interested to learn why they didn't manage to keep you. Anyway, you dropped very neatly into our hands."

"Into your hands?" Charles asked with genuine amazement.

"The Cometeers."

"The Cometeers are an Israeli organization? Unbelievable."

"Let's say, we provided the first spark for the powder trail. Its success has rather overwhelmed us. Our psychological advisers plotted it out, but I think even they have been surprised by the results. The present membership figures are astonishing, and there's a steep upward curve for the rate of increase."

Isaacssohn spoke into the tube again, and again the TV picture changed. A larger courtyard appeared on the screen. Charles watched more flyers drop towards a row of black canisters laid out at about three yard intervals on the ground. The frameworks supporting them carried on each side a small barrel-like device, terminating in a nozzle.

Suddenly, and presumably at a word of command—because the effects were nearly simultaneous—there was a lambent flickering around each of the nozzles. On the ground the canisters—or all but two of them—burst into flame.

"The heat ray," said Isaacssohn. "Beloved by managerial TV serial writers. The other diamond application. Unfortunately its use is limited to conditions of sunlight, but under such conditions, it is most effective."

Isaacssohn switched off the screen, and got up.

Grayner said, "Just how much of all this did Sarah know—when she was with you at San Miguel?"

"Our conventions are perhaps peculiar. There are some things we don't regard as suitable for women. They include counter-revolution and military strategy. Sarah didn't know anything. Come, let's call on Professor Cohn."

The gyro brought them to the grounds of a modest grey house on the outskirts of Jerusalem. The room to which they were shown was unassuming. Professor Cohn got up to greet them from a scratched and shabby desk. There was no large TV screen in the room, only a portable callscreen beside the desk.

Isaacssohn said. "May I present you! Professor Cohn, President of Israel; Charles Grayner."

Professor Cohn said, "Our apologies, Charles. I hear you've been somewhat roughly handled, too. That wasn't intended. We've been inculcating aggressiveness into our soldiers, and it's difficult to prevent them from overdoing it at times."

"When did you become President of Israel?" Charles asked. "I haven't seen the newsreels lately."

"Would your newsreels regard it as worth the recording? I suppose they might. But this has been a very secret palace revolution. We thought it best not to let the news leak out just yet. The *coup d'état* coincided with Hans's return here. It was planned and went without a hitch. I was called back when it was all over."

"Sarah . . ."

"I felt it was necessary to bring Sarah with me. There were a number of good reasons for that, not the least being her value as a hostage if left behind. She expressed unwillingness when I told her."

Professor Cohn looked at Charles keenly. "She wanted to tell you, but of course that was impossible. I was afraid she might have left some clue—though I took all precautions."

Grayner nodded. Only now was he beginning to grasp the scope of the plan underlying the work of Isaacssohn, the disappearances, his own abduction. Keeping his voice even, he said, "The idea, I suppose, is of some sort of aggression against the rest of the world—a foray for fresh territory."

Professor Cohn was smiling at him benignly.

"How long has that been in preparation?" asked Charles.

"A very long time. On an old Japanese analogy, Hans and I were members of the war party. There was a peace party. Our temporary eviction was the result of a temporary defeat in an earlier skirmish. The position has now been rectified."

"You want war. Why?"

Professor Cohn raised his hands. "Wanting doesn't enter into it. The world outside is breaking up. There will be chaos there, anyway, within a couple of decades. As the only state with any vitality at all, we should have to go out then and reclaim the chaos. It would be a long job and a painful one—unnecessarily so. It is simpler, and a lot more efficient, to precipitate matters. Has Hans mentioned the Cometeers to you? We've found confirmation for our views there, and it is of great help in the softening-up."

Charles said, "Let me see if I can understand what you are talking about. You mean—Israel is taking the whole planet over?"

"Exactly."

"With a handful of aerial soldiers and a heat-ray that only works at close quarters, and when the sun happens to be shining?"

"I should put it somewhat higher than that," Professor Cohn said judiciously. "Let me explain something of the art of warfare to you, Charles. That art, throughout the

centuries, has seen a continual alternation in the status of the individual warrior, through the alternation in the kind of weapons at man's disposal.

"To render the situation down, you may say that artillery dwarfs the individual soldier, while small arms magnifies him. Of course, you can pick your own variations on the theme, from the conflict between the giant sling and the javelin in Roman times, to the conflict between the big guns and the musket in the eighteenth century.

"During the twentieth century, the balance swung—irretrievably as it seemed—away from the soldier. Massed artillery barrages, pattern bombing, and finally the atomic and hydrogen bombs seemed to tilt the scales finally towards the mass weapon. And weapons, of course, affect society. The musket was typical of capitalism, just as the H-bomb is typical of managerialism, even though it was the last stage of world capitalism that produced it."

"The managerial world," Charles observed, "still has a stock of H-bombs."

"Which are quite useless. The mass-weapon has grown too big to use. Yes, I know it was used in the last war, but the results bear me out, don't they? Do you think your friends will use H-bombs? On what targets? We shall have Africa within a week,

Europe within ten days. Do you know what the situation resembles?"

"I'll tell you. It resembles a small iron-walled room, full of big men holding Klaberg pistols. And a child comes in with a water-pistol and drenches them. They can't hit back because they haven't got any water-pistols, and wouldn't know how to use them if they had. And if they fire their pistols, the charges will ricochet off the walls. They are as likely as not to kill themselves, and they know it."

"As far as I can see, a longbow would out-shoot your new weapon, Professor Cohn. Did that occur to you?"

Professor Cohn smiled. "And which managerial has a stock of longbows? I take your point, though. The heat ray is not the weapon that restores the initiative to the soldier. The flying apparatus is. We've had the essential design for some time, but it's heavy on power—as you might expect. The sun, fortunately, is an inexhaustible powerhouse. That makes the weapon worth having. Wings on every soldier. A flying army. There isn't one key point that can't be taken by a half a dozen of our flying soldiers."

Grayner could visualize the Cometeers running hog-wild . . . It was a cast-iron scheme. Understanding this, Charles wondered why it had all been explained to

him. His skill wasn't wanted now. The only advantage he represented to Israel was the assurance that he would not be doing anything for the managerials.

"Why have you told me all this?" he said.

"Because I am going to ask you to promise not to escape or communicate with anyone outside of Israel. I think you must be told enough of your situation to make its implications clear to you."

"How long before you attack?"

"We shall go ahead in the very near future," said Professor Cohn.

"In which case," Grayner said, "surely it would be simpler to keep me under lock and key. I would appreciate the opportunity of talking things over with Mr. Dinkuhl."

Professor Cohn nodded. "Naturally. Hans will take you back."

DINKUHL WAS sitting up in bed, in a small but not unattractive room. He grinned wryly. "Good to see you, Charles. You look well."

Isaacssohn said, "I'll leave you here, Charles. I'm afraid we have to post a guard outside, for the time being. He will take you to me whenever you want that."

"Adios," Dinkuhl said. "Back to the detector screen? Why not just crawl under the bed?"

Isaacssohn looked puzzled for a moment. "Oh, I get it. No, you're private in here. Our privacy regulations forbid the instal-



lation of detector equipment." He smiled and went out.

Dinkuhl looked after him. "You know," he said, "I believe he's telling the truth."

"Probably. How are you feeling?"

Dinkuhl rubbed his head gingerly. "Regretful. Death was more welcome. But it will pass. The number who takes my pulse will help it pass, I feel."

"It will need to," Grayner said. "You will need all your faculties to think up a scheme for getting us out of this."

Dinkuhl's look was quizzical. "Maybe you'd better let me have everything you know."

He listened in silence while Charles repeated what he had been told by Isaacssohn and Professor Cohn. Dinkuhl said at last, "Give them your promise not to escape and enjoy yourself."

"Listen, Hiram. This building is served for TV by a single transmitter-receiver room. I know where it is because Isaacssohn took me past it and the door was open. There is only one duty operator—and to my mind there's only one man who might be able to do anything worth while with the information we could give him."

"Raven?"

"Yes, Raven. Do you agree?"

Dinkuhl nodded. "I agree. I told you once, Charlie—you were the H-bomb. You were what was going to blow the top off. You

were the Destruction, and I served the Destruction. You aren't now, are you? Go in peace, brother, if go you must."

"You've found a bigger bomb?"

"Just that," said Dinkuhl. "Now I wait. I don't know what I wait for, but I wait. I don't kid myself the Israelis have got much more than the managerials, except in the military line, but it looks like being an interesting year. Go and get the word through to Raven, if your loyalties are still stronger than your common sense. I don't say it won't affect the issue. I'm a neutral now."

Charles called out to the guard. His voice seemed unnatural to him. He posted himself behind the door, grasping, by its projecting handle, a heavy wooden fruit bowl he picked up at the side of Dinkuhl's bed.

The door opened and the guard came in. It was an easy matter to crash the bowl down on the back of his head. He pitched forward in a falling arc and hit the floor with a cracking thud.

The corridor was deserted and it was no more than ten yards to the service elevator. The TV room was on the ground floor. When he opened the door of the room, the operator was sitting at the main control panel with his back to the door.

He had not yet become aware of the open door, but he might at any moment. Grayner ran towards

him, raising the fruit bowl above his head as he did so. The operator turned around, in time to take the blow on his forehead.

Grayner went back and secured the door. The point was, with a meagre knowledge of TV communications, to get on to the outside circuits and contact Raven. It took him five minutes to master the controls.

He said to the operator, "Jerusalem for Atomics HG, Philadelphia."

He thought of what Raven would do when he gave him the news. The managerials, under such a threat, would be forced into unity to defend themselves. And then? The Israelis would go through with it. A bitter war, a long war. The managerials would be unlikely to save Africa; Europe might go, too. But the Americas were defensible, especially if Raven took the obvious precaution of rounding up the leaders of the Cometeers.

For Raven, it would be a good war: the natural, the automatic leader. Grayner's thoughts were wryly humorous. Let Raven have it. All he wanted himself was peace of a kind: the feeling that, dragged from obscurity into temporary greatness, he had kept his faith with the society that had bred him—whether shot through with evil, whether condemned to die despite everything, he had kept faith. For that he was willing to

let the rest go—his personal liberty, his life if they required it . . . and Sarah Cohn.

Raven had seen catastrophe coming. And it had been a different catastrophe even so. Civil war is something you never believe in until it breaks out. So is the collapse of a state from within. It was the outside shock that stimulated half-forgotten patriotism.

It was hard to think of losing Sarah when he had come so very close to finding her again. The picture was plaguing him now; he thrust it back, finding crazy jingles of thought to keep it at bay. "Raven the Raven, Raven's rav-in' . . ."

*Raven's rain . . .*

It became a real thought. What would Raven do? Call the Council—round up the leaders of the Cometeers? He saw suddenly that he had been under-estimating Raven. Professor Cohn had been contemptuous of the H-bomb because by the time the managerials had awakened the fact of invasion, the airborne Israeli armies would be all over Africa and Europe. In those conditions it would be impossible to use the H-bomb. But he was creating different conditions—the Israelis still locked within their relatively small territory were a target Raven would not miss.

The girl said, "Philadelphia coming in, Jerusalem. They will be transferred as soon as focused."

It hit him so hard that for a moment there seemed to be blackness before his eyes.

. . . Sarah was in the target.

The girl said, "Philadelphia is in focus, Jerusalem. Are you ready?"

To the right of the desk there was the building's code of numbers. Isaacssohn was 71.

"Philadelphia . . ." the voice began again.

Grayner did not look up. "Cancel it," he said.

She said, "Okay. Cancelled."

The picture faded. He connected to 71. He said, when Isaacssohn answered, "This is Grayner. I'm in the TV room. You can come and collect me."

A HALF-HOUR later, Grayner was talking to Sarah. Looking at her, he wondered how he could ever have been taken in by the false-Sarah. The thing about her was not the lines of her face, or the shape of her body, but the sparkle, the altogether inimitable glint of personality.

And, although Sarah was smiling, she was watching him warily. How could he have forgotten that special wariness! It was more a part of Sarah than the tiny bulges just above her eyebrows. He remembered the fake flesh, peeled off by Dinkuhl's knife . . .

"I've had not a real existence, Sarah, since I lost you," Charles said humbly.

She patted the plastifoam couch. "Come and sit down." She was wearing the very full skirt which was the common dress of Israeli women, and she drew it towards her to let him sit down.

Grayner told her immediately about the false-Sarah; it was a relief to make confession.

"You went airsphering with her," Sarah said thoughtfully.

He nodded. "Yes," He wondered if he looked as uneasy as he felt.

"It's a very romantic occupation. A cousin of mine did a thesis on the aphrodisiacal effects of airsphering. He had to go outside Israel for the practical work, of course, because our young ladies don't go airsphering except with their fiancés. He went to Greece."

Grayner looked at her unhappily. "Yes?"

"The correlation was positive." Sarah paused. "Tell me. What was I like?"

"It was a very good disguise. Just like you, physically—of course, they had had access to your records. But I shouldn't have been deceived by it. It wasn't you, Sarah."

"Not even in the airsphere, high above the clouds?"

He grinned shamefacedly. "Least of all, then. I was surprised."

"But pleased, I guess." She got up from the couch and stood facing him. The trace of a smile made

her face expressionless. She leaned forward slightly and slapped him, stingingly hard, on either cheek. He put his hand up and rubbed first one side and then the other. She stood looking at him.

"What was that for?" he asked.

The smile deepened, but he still could not read the inward expression.

She said, "The first was on behalf of the other Sarah. She should have done it, so I'm doing it for her. The second was on my own account—for your still having thought it was I, afterwards."

He nodded, in gloom. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry! What about doing something to show you really are sorry?"

He looked up. "I'll do anything, Sarah."

He thought her composure was going to desert her for a moment. There was the beginning of embarrassment, but she controlled it. She said brusquely, "This afternoon then. You can take me airsphering."

Charles grasped her hand, and Sarah let him pull her down beside him on the couch again. She averted her face from his kisses, but she was smiling happily now. He hesitated in the attempt as a thought struck him.

"But you just said—no airsphering except with—"

"Fiancés? Idiot! Don't you realize you are being proposed to?"

He drew her to him, and now she took his kisses, and kissed him back. After some minutes, he released her.

Sarah looked at him thoughtfully. "Well?"

"Since you are going to marry me, I'd prefer to get all my punishment over in advance. I went airsphering more than once."

Sarah raised her eyebrows. "How many times?"

"About half a dozen."

She smiled. "And we'll have a lifetime together, darling," she said.

## XIV

THE DIRECTOR'S garden on the roof of the Einstein Institute was almost exclusively made up of evergreens and roses. The roses were cultivated to bloom all the year round so the seasons did not touch it. From the garden, on this morning, it was a small party that looked out, away from the centre of Jerusalem, towards the military camp on the outskirts.

The party was made up of Professor Cohn and Isaacssohn, Sarah and Charles, and Dinkuhl. The sky was a sparkling blue, and the great sun itself dimmed, by comparison, the sunlets that were strung above their heads.

Professor Cohn said, "Hans has been telling me about your idea, Charles. We'd considered the plan of utilizing the space stations as

solar power collectors, of course, but the distribution is impossible. They can collect all right, but the only power they use is for TV boosting. We can't run cables up to them.

"This idea of yours—of maintaining a collector on airsphere. It just might work. We could run cables there, for reasonably low cloud levels, at any rate. There's a problem—would they drift?"

"They couldn't if they were cabled, could they? At least, not far. The airspheres take care of the buoyancy, and the cables take care of the drift. You could have an operator up there, as well. There's no reason why it shouldn't work."

Professor Cohn nodded his head. "Cheap power all the year around," he said. "Make a big difference in the cloudy territories—the British Isles, and so on. What do you think, Hans?"

"Very nice. I can foresee some lively problems. I suggest this presents a good first job for the Hebron lab."

Sarah protested. "Let's get over the honeymoon first. We haven't officially accepted Hebron yet."

Isaacssohn said, "I speak with my full military authority." He grinned. "Any recalcitrance and I'll split you—Charles to Cairo and you to Constantinople. I can make that opposing hemispheres once the take-over is accomplished."

"Managerialist!" Sarah said. "We wouldn't go."

Professor Cohn said, "It's a pity we can't do anything about utilizing power in space. Such a waste. But short of developing a power transmitter, it can't be done."

Charles said, "There's one way of utilizing it."

"And that is?"

"Atomic-powered spaceships are clumsy and hellishly expensive. Diamond-solar power would make them a different proposition altogether."

Professor Cohn nodded slowly.

Isaacssohn said, "Get thee to Hebron. *Malesh* the honeymoon."

"*Malesh* the spaceships," Sarah said. "First things come first."

Dinkuhl had not spoken very much. Charles put his hand on Dinkuhl's shoulder, "What about you, Hiram? Decided on anything yet? Are you going to stay here?"

"I'm not sure," Dinkuhl said.

Isaacssohn looked at Dinkuhl. "I've offered him the job of running the Telecom units, as we take them over. It's still open."

"What about it, Hiram?" Charles asked.

Dinkuhl appeared to rouse himself. "Very kind of everybody. I guess I'm not an organizer, though."

"When we first met in this business," Charles said, "in Detroit—you said you had thought of trying to get KF transferred to Israel. Well, here you are. Why not?"

"A misconception," Dinkuhl said. "KF was a legacy from capitalism—Israel was capitalist. I missed the nuances. KF stemmed from philanthropic capitalism, from capitalism in decay. Israel is a different kind of capitalism. Nearer to the roots, maybe. And the root of capitalism is giving people what they want—what they want, not what they *ought* to want. They never wanted KF, except the cranks, and a sane and healthy society doesn't cater for the cranks."

Charles studied his friend seriously, "Isn't there anything you want, Hiram?"

"There is one thing."

Isaacssohn was looking intently at his finger-watch. "I think . . . now!"

They stared, fascinated. From the camp the leather-jacketed swarm was rising, like locusts, into the sharp blue sky. At this moment, throughout the Israeli territory, similar swarms were setting out.

"Mankind is on the move again," said Professor Cohn.

"They'll get by," Dinkuhl said. "Mankind is like Charlie. Mankind is adaptable. You'll be happy at Hebron, Charlie. A wife and a line of research—two lines of research. What more could you want? I hope you're glad I didn't come in with you on the last break. There was no one I wanted to save from the H-bomb."

The swarm had already become a cloud on the horizon, a fading cloud.

Dinkuhl gestured towards it. "I prefer it spread well out. A pattern for a wanderer—excitement everywhere."

Isaacssohn said, "I interrupted you just now. You were going to say there was something you wanted. If we can provide it, it's yours."

Dinkuhl nodded. "Very kind of you. It isn't much. I'd like the use of a camel."

### CODA

IT WAS A part of the country from which even the aggressive Israeli agriculture had fallen back in dismay—rocky barren ground useless for everything except grazing sheep. Dinkuhl had passed several flocks, tended by young boys who would presumably grow into the leather jackets that awaited them, the sun-powered wings. But this section was deserted.

He was alone, with the camel and his thoughts. He had grown used by now to the uneasy rocking motion of his passage, and to the camel's grunts, the flapping pad of its feet and what he suspected was the creaking of its joints.

It was night. Stars, but no moon. The stars themselves were big and brilliant in a cloudless sky. Weather, he reflected, was still on the side of Israel. He wondered where

the flying men had reached by now—Cape Town, Gibraltar, London, Moscow, Delhi?

The comet looked very big, too, and almost overhead.

The Israelis, the Managerialists, the Cometeers . . . There was nothing to despair of losing, and so there could be nothing to hope for. What was he doing, riding a swaying camel through the clear winter's night? Nothing. Progressing in time and space from nowhere to nowhere, with the only consolation that of knowing what he was doing—that he was doing nothing.

He was searching for something. Happiness. Happiness in a world of Israelis and Managerialists and Cometeers, a world of Ellecotts and Ledbetters and Ravens, of Cohns and Isaacssohns, for that matter of Charles' and Sarahs—of Dinkuhls. You needed to be a fool to stay happy in that world.

For the first time since it had come, indifference left him, retreating a little way before the upspringing of that which had been dead. Hope without despair? Hope for hope's sake? His mind cried irrationally, remembering the words of a wise old prophet he'd once met: *Stay with me! Stay with me, anyway!*

Hope came with innocence, and went with knowledge. And can a man unlearn what he has learned? *Stay with me*, his mind cried again. *Let me be a child, but stay*

*with me. I was willing to give up everything to despair, except my knowledge. Take that, too, if I can have hope.*

He rode his swaying camel under the frost-bright stars. Ahead he could see the lights of a village, a small village but lit as though for carnival. He could hear voices singing. It was puzzling, because the village was still too far away for the songs to come from there. The voices seemed nearer, and at last he recognized the singers, coming towards him along the stony path. They were young Israeli lads, shepherds.

They were rejoicing, and he was happy in their happiness. He tried to catch the words of their song, but he had very little understanding of the dialect. As they came abreast of him, he called out to them, using some of the native language he'd picked up.

"What's the name of this village?" Dinkuhl asked.

Several of them answered him, but he knew what name it would be before they said it. He pricked the camel with the goad, urging it to greater speed.

He said aloud, crying to the black sky, to the stars, to the plunging comet, "I was ready to give up knowledge for hope. And now they are one."

From the rag-bag of memory he found words—words that it surprised him to remember.

"Nunc dimittis . . ."



# Al Capp's Wondrous LI'L ABNER



*An editorial analysis of the ingenious mind and art of the world's foremost satirist and the best read humorist in U. S. history—the one and only Al Capp.*

**T**HE FIFTY MILLION readers of Al Capp's wondrous *Li'l Abner* would undoubtedly be amazed—as only a capacity audience can be amazed!—to open their morning papers and see *Li'l Abner* and *Daisy Mae* having a spell of arguing on Mars, or pursuing a bird of brilliant plumage through a Venusian tidal marsh.

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started carving his initials on our minds and hearts, along with big chunks of shy, wonderful laughter, those of us who were “in the know” realized that Al Capp was the kind of creative genius who would take the keenest delight in letting his unparalleled imagination soar. And we do mean soar—through galaxies piled on galaxies to the farthest planet of the farthest star.

You can be sure that whenever Al Capp undertakes such a journey—in the privacy of his work-





shop perhaps—he takes with him all of the creations which have made him a master of hilarious satire and quite possibly the only cartoonist in America today whose work has an absolutely universal appeal. As far as we know there are no Al Capp dissenters, no carping critics with chips on their shoulders daring Al Capp to prove them wrong.

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What is perhaps not quite so universally known is the fact that Al Capp has always taken the liveliest personal delight in science fiction and has read widely in the field. Those of us who attended the 14th World Science Fiction Convention last September in New York City will never forget the talk he gave on that occasion, for he made it plain that he regarded science fiction as an important branch of imaginative literature which has contributed sub-

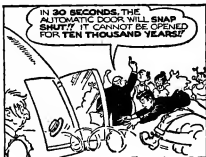


Al Capp by *Carte*

stantially to the speculative insight and self-knowledge of readers everywhere.

SATELLITE was largely instrumental in arranging for Al Capp's presence at the WSFC banquet. And now SATELLITE takes pleasure in bringing you an Al Capp feature which we're sure will thrill you—actual Al Capp cartoons illustrating and supplementing in fabulous narrative fashion what we've tried to convey in this brief editorial analysis of his ingenious mind and art—just how close to Al Capp's heart and to the steady, bright flame of his creative genius are the twin worlds of science fiction and science fantasy.

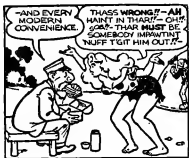
# LI'L ABNER. *17*



# "The Time Capsule" BY AL CAPP



# LIL ABNER



*Is dead  
but fed-*

**BY AL CAPP**

AN INVESTIGATING COMMITTEE IS SENT FROM WASHINGTON!!



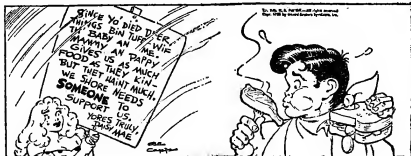
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## ABNER YOKUM DEAD, CLAIMS GOVT.

Lil Abner Yokum of Dogpatch has been declared dead by the U.S. Tax Department. His many friends will be pleased to learn, however, that he is in fine health, and will be glad to see them any day, from 9 to 5, at Science Park, where he expects to be, for the next ten thousand years.



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# LIL ABNER

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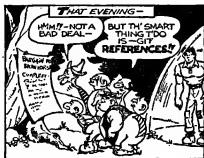
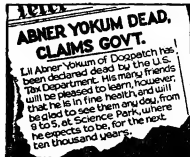


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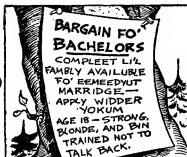
*Gives Daisy Mae a splendid reference!!*

**BY AL CAPP**



# LI'L ABNER

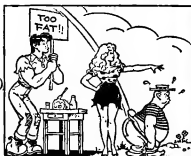
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—Auditions  
replacements—

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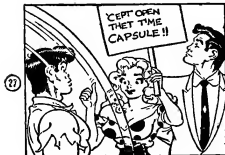
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# LI'L ABNER



*Proves brains  
ain't everything!!*

**BY AL CAPP**



# CATHARTIC

by WILLIAM SAMBROT

*Across wide gulfs of space it swept, in  
search of a desert burning bright and the  
terrible, dark seeds of its own destruction!*



IT HAD BEEN moving through space for a meaningless length of time—a chunk of pure siliceous matter, absorbing faint emanations from distant bodies which were sufficient to maintain life, but nothing else. It lived, but it had neither will nor intelligence. It could grow—and explosively—but only under certain rigidly specified conditions, none of which were present in the blank immensity of intra-galactic areas.

But it had a purpose, a very definite purpose, a destiny to fulfill before it ceased to be alive. For it was not immortal. One circumstance could cause its immediate dissolution. And again, that circumstance occurred only under definite, specific conditions.

As it hurtled through space it approached a minor galaxy, slipped through its many globular star clusters and continued on. Nearer and nearer to a certain

faint star it swept, until at last, as inevitably as a cosmic lodestone, it fell victim to the gravitational pull of a small inner planet of that star.

The planet was extraordinary in that—out of the many millions of such satellite bodies in space—it was among the mere handful that existed in such perfect, delicate balance within its own system that it was capable of supporting a multitude of life forms. And some of these forms were complex in structure and possessed a high order of intelligence.

Yet despite their advanced instruments of science, the intelligent inhabitants of the planet failed to pick up the approaching cosmic visitor until its mile-wide bulk burned fiery white. With almost unbelievable velocity it arced through the planet's protective envelope and plummeted into the very heart of a vast sandy desert, some three and a half million square miles in area. The heat generated by its passage through the atmosphere had affected its outer crust not at all. But it did produce a profound change notwithstanding. It awakened the dormant life within.

The sandy wasteland wherein the mass lay embedded was only one of many such arid regions, comprising millions of square miles of totally infertile land, which were duplicated many times over on the middle-aged, some-

what ailing planet. At both its slightly flattened poles were immense icefields, miles thick, which extended for many millions of square miles down its bulging shoulders.

It possessed in addition enormously high mountains, snow-capped, wind-swept, and utterly incapable of supporting life, and oceans which for hundreds of millions of years, under inconceivable pressures, had remained in their black cold depths completely barren of productive life.

The buried lump of siliceous life grew slowly and steadily. It grew by direct mathematical progression. Every substance necessary for its rapid expansion was at hand—an inexhaustible supply of silicons and an unending flood of fierce direct radiations from the nearby sun.

It grew, and it grew. The desert was approximately eight-hundred miles long and fourteen-hundred miles wide. And downward, sideways, upward, the silica-parasite expanded, quite literally devouring the nearly infinite bulk of the sandy waste. Shoving its jagged already-colossal mass up and out and down, faster and faster, absorbing the hot life-giving radiations from the sun, it grew.

The first intelligent inhabitant of the globe to notice the strange phenomenon was a chieftain of a nomadic tribe whose custom it was to wander over the endless

expanse of the desert. Shielding his eyes, the lean brown man saw a great towering mountain where none had stood before. It appeared from his distance to be several miles high and perhaps fifty miles long. He shrugged and said nothing. Mirages were common in that pitilessly hot, dry region.

Next the pilot of an airplane searching the area for a downed machine saw off in the distance—above a region not normally traversed—an incredible mountain range, hitherto uncharted. He was flying at thirty-thousand feet and seemed to be about level with its highest point. It stretched in both directions as far as the eye could see. It was a totally arid chain, with no trace of life or vegetation visible on its far-flung ranges. The awestruck man reported the sighting but in the routine of recovering the downed machine, his report was ignored.

But not for long. The thing continued to grow until it covered a land mass some two million square miles in area. It was now twelve miles high. And yet, so remote was the inaccessible region, that except for the few reports filtering in, the gigantic intruder might have been on the moon, for all the stir it created.

It grew until it reached a proportion of near-critical size and then the intelligent inhabitants of the planet were immediately

aware that something extraordinary was happening.

At the summer solstice, the planet did not begin its tedious creaking procession toward the autumnal equinox. Instead, it continued on its downward swing until both of its northern hemispheres basked under the direct rays of the fierce sun. Equatorial countries froze. Near-arctic countries became temperate. Slowly, slowly, the planet struggled to right itself in its accustomed wobble that produced the seasons.

Ponderously, in its cosmic roll, it eventually succeeded and started its reverse motion. And still the intruder from space grew. By this time, all of the intelligent inhabitants were aware of the siliceous parasite. They made exhaustive borings, chipped it, analyzed it, took soundings, and reached the obvious conclusion that it was a phenomenon strange beyond belief—terrifying in its implications.

The more far-sighted, after quietly taking measurements, realized that the mass would soon double itself and reach a critical point which could have but one outcome. These wiser and more far-seeing men immediately made what preparations they could. But in the end, the wise and the ignorant, shared the same terrible fate.

With a sudden rending twist the planet flipped, over-balanced by the great outcropping of solid rock

on its flank. The globe shuddered, split asunder and spewed forth great masses of rock and flaming lava. Carbon dioxide flooded the atmosphere and in seconds the inhabitants—both men and animals—who were not crushed died from asphyxiation. The polar caps began their long slow melting process. Mountains leveled and the unique life-sustaining globe actually expanded, smoothing out her wrinkles as her flaming core pushed outward on her crust.

Miles-high walls of water swept over the land, and with all barriers down, eventually flooded even the remote sunken area in which the monolithic siliceous structure towered.

The warm water rose all about the base of the monolith and then, as the fat clouds spread over the

entire globe and poured down steaming rain, the condition was fulfilled and the parasite died. Slowly, slowly, the silicon structure dissolved, slipping sideways and down into the shallow ocean. Gradually the structure reverted to its unimaginable number of components, carpeting the bed of the ocean for hundreds of thousands of miles with tiny grains of sand, sterile, gleaming, forever one with the parent body.

And the planet lived on, young again, robust, spewing forth its volcanoes rumbling lustily in its guts, raining mightily from its skies. And within the warm womb of Earth's shallow, all-encompassing seas, life stirred and propagated and made ready for new adventures.



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## NEXT ISSUES

### COMPLETE NOVEL

# ROCKET TO LIMBO

by ALAN E. NOURSE

*There had never been a ship like the Argonaut before. She was no clumsy orbit-craft designed to carry colonists to Venus or Mars. The Argonaut was a star ship designed for one purpose—to traverse the black gulfs between the stars. Her mission: Alien worlds . . . adventures extraordinary!*

**DAL STIVENS**

## Some Rain

**D**O YOU CALL this rain?" demanded my Great Uncle Bartholomew. "Do you, my boy?"

I said I did. My Uncle Bartholomew snorted so loudly the tips of his mustaches quivered. His mustaches gave my Uncle Bartholomew the appearance of an Indian water buffalo—an outraged one now with assertive blue eyes.





"When I was in India and the monsoon came—there, my boy, was something worth calling rain," he said. "Not this New York spray.

"Once it rained for one hundred and eighteen days without a stop and do you know what happened? All the telephone posts sprouted. Had to put on fifty thousand coolies lopping the posts to keep up communications. Couldn't ring-bark the telephone posts, you see, because they were dead already.

"You've no idea what so much moisture does to you. I went to stroke my dog one day and jabbed my finger on a spike. Bless me, if the hound wasn't growing scales and web feet. Had the same trouble myself. Not web feet, you idiot, but with my shaving. Kept fouling up the razor on the scales.

"It didn't affect everybody in the same way. Some of the government employees just grew moss—on the south side. They got a special allowance for scraping the moss away, claimed it was an occupational hazard. You've no idea how silly a man looks with moss on one side. Only one government employee didn't look a perfect ass. He grew moss on *all* sides. But then, his job helped him. He was a budding diplomat.

"To return to the rain. I was awakened one morning by a fearful roar. It startled me so much

I jumped and overturned the canoe in which I was sleeping at the time. Took me a month of Sundays to swim back to the oak branch where I had tied up. What had scared me was a whale. He'd come right in from the ocean and was promenading up the main street, three hundred miles inland. He was the first of a plague of whales. They'd have eaten the place clean in a week if I hadn't taken a hand. Just when things looked darkest I remembered my old days as a sheep man in Australia and trained a few dog sharks to chase the whales away. Then I got another idea and built a corral—used a mountain valley and herded the whales into it. Made a fortune out of the whales. Just goes to show you, doesn't it, my boy?

"Did well out of the rains, generally. I quickly realized that with all that moisture and heat practically anything would grow. So I started a walking stick farm. Sawed up my favorite blackthorn in pieces about an inch long and planted them on the tops of mountains. In two days, believe it or not, I had three dozen new sticks. Kept on sawing them, too. Like growing dollars, it was. I even found a way of growing the handles.

"The usual method is to train swallows to perch on them and bend them over. But all the birds had cleared out—except the

doves. I guess they kind of suspected they might be needed. Tradition, you know. As I was saying, I couldn't use swallows. Trained the climbing perch instead. Perch made a better stick, if anything. Used the fish slime to give the wood a veneer you couldn't have got otherwise.

"I was courting a very pretty girl in those days and often went to see her. Had to wait half a day each time. It seems she slept in a four-poster and it was two hundred feet up in the air and sprouting branches everywhere. I should have had an inkling then of the tragedy that was coming into my life, but love can be blind. Girl was growing gills. Married her, but was case of forsaken merman—only the other way around. Tried to grow gills myself, but nature wasn't having any. She has her rules, like anyone else.

"The last I saw of her she was going off hand in hand with a dolphin.

"Tragedy of my life. Made myself an aqualung. Didn't you know we had them, my boy? First of

the frogmen. Well, I went after that girl.

"Found her all right. Married to a merman. The dolphin must have just been a marriage broker. She had a couple of kids, too, by that time. Didn't I tell you things grew quickly? I crept up close. It seems the little blighters wouldn't eat their water-weed spinach. The girl saw me all right. Know what that girl told the kids, very slangily? 'If you don't eat your Pop-Eye the Sailor man greens you'll grow up to look like *that*!' I'm quoting her word for word.

"No place for me, my boy, after that. I kept my grief from showing and went back to the surface. Had a bit of trouble getting there, too. The rain had stopped and the water had dried up. Had to tear off the aqualung to breathe properly.

"That was rain for you. Had a drought recently in New York, my boy? Twenty days without rain? Nothing to what I saw in the Sahara. Got heat-stroke there once and my boys threw a bucket of sand over me to revive me. . . ."





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# Jolly Roger

BRAND

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Another scan  
by  
cape1736

